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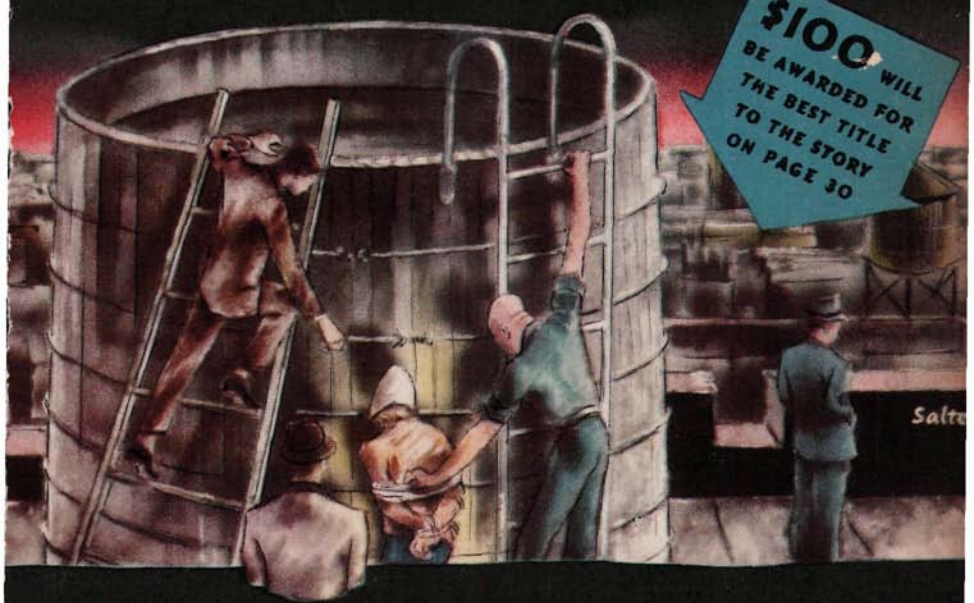

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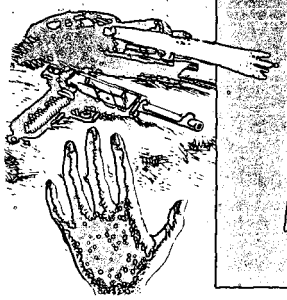

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In this issue of EQMM we make a noble editorial experiment. We bring you a double-length story, the first half written by a famous detective-story writer, and the second half written by another *famous detective-story writer. The first half of the story opens our issue, and the second half closes it — thus giving you the whole tale complete in this issue.*

Together, both parts of the story are titled "Mystery in Room 913." The first half, however, has its own title — "The Suicide Room." And the second half follows suit, calling itself "The Murder Room."

The author of the first part is none other than Cornell Woolrich, one of the most dynamic talents in contemporary crime writing. Mr. Woolrich sets the stage, introduces the characters, presents the story situation, advances the plot, and when it has reached the boiling point in suspense and terror, he calmly steps out of the picture!

Then the second author takes up the challenge.

But the big question was: Who is the perfect detective-story writer to finish a story started by Cornell Woolrich?

Well, what sort of man is Cornell Woolrich? Let us know the man, and we can then comb the field for another writer who fits hand-and-glove — or should we say, who fits homicide-and-gumshoe — with the problem.

Here is a 'tec tintype of Cornell Woolrich, as prepared by the author himself: Cornell Woolrich is in his middle forties; he has brown hair and blue eyes, is five feet nine inches tall, and was born in New York City. He has won the coveted "Edgar" Award, given by Mystery Writers of America, for outstanding contribution to the detective-crime-mystery short story. He is married on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Obviously, the writer to finish Mr. Woolrich's "The Suicide Room" should be the perfect counterpart — better still, the identical 'tec twin.

Now, read the first half of the story, and then we'll tell you about the other famous detective-story writer whom we picked to finish one of the most unusual tales ever born in Mr. Woolrich's brilliant headpiece . . .

MYSTERY IN ROOM 913: The Suicide Room

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THEY thought it was the Depression the first time it happened. The guy had checked in one night in the black March of '33, in the middle of the memorable bank holiday. He was well-dressed and respectable looking. He had baggage with him, plenty of it, so he wasn't asked to pay in ad-

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vance. Everyone was short of ready cash that week. Besides, he'd asked for the weekly rate.

He signed the register *James Hopper, Schenectady,* and Dennison, eyeing the red vacancy-tags in the pigeonholes, pulled out the one in 913 at random and gave him that. Not the vacancy tag, the room. The guest went up, okayed the room, and George the bell hop was sent up with his bags. George came down and reported a dime without resentment; it was '33, after all.

Striker had sized him up, of course. That was part of his duties, and the house detective found nothing either for him or against him. Striker had been with the St. Anselm two years at that time. He'd had his salary cut in '31, and then again in '32, but so had everyone else on the staff. He didn't look much like a house dick, which was why he was good for the job. He was a tall, lean, casual-moving guy, without that annoying habit most hotel dicks have of staring people out of countenance. He used finesse about it; got the same results, but with sort of a blank, idle expression as though he were thinking of something else. He also lacked the usual paunch, in spite of his sedentary life, and never wore a hard hat. He had a little radio in his top-floor cubbyhole and a stack of vintage "fantastics," pulp magazines dealing with super-science and the supernatural, and that seemed to be all he asked of life.

The newcomer who had signed as Hopper came down again in about half an hour and asked Dennison if there were any good movies nearby. The clerk recommended one and the guest went to it. This was about eight p.m. He came back at eleven, picked up his key, and went up to his room. Dennison and Striker both heard him whistling lightly under his breath as he stepped into the elevator. Nothing on his mind but a good night's rest, apparently.

Striker turned in himself at twelve. He was subject to call twenty-four hours a day. There was no one to relieve him. The St. Anselm was on the downgrade, and had stopped having an assistant house dick about a year before.

He was still awake, reading in bed, about an hour later when the desk man rang him. "Better get down here quick, Strike! Nine-thirteen's just fallen out!" The clerk's voice was taut, frightened.

Striker threw on coat and pants over his pajamas and got down as fast as the creaky old-fashioned elevator would let him. He went out to the street, around to the side under the 13-line.

Hopper was lying there dead, the torn leg of his pajamas rippling in the bitter March night wind. There wasn't anyone else around at that hour except the night porter, the policeman he'd called, and who had called his precinct house in turn, and a taxi driver or two. Maxon, the midnight-to-morning clerk (Dennison went off at 11:30), had to remain at his post for obvious reasons. They

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were just standing there waiting for the morgue ambulance; there wasn't anything they could do.

Bob, the night porter, was saying: "I thought it was a pillow someone drap out the window. I come up the basement way, see a thick white thing lying there, flappin' in th' wind. I go over, fix to kick it with my foot —" He broke off. "Golly, man!"

One of the drivers said, "I seen him comin' down." No one disputed the point, but he insisted, "No kidding, I seen him coming down! I was just cruisin' past, one block over, and I look this way, and I see — whisht, *ungh* — like a pancake!"

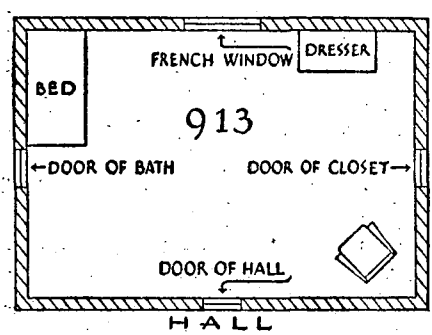
The other cab driver, who hadn't seen him coming down, said: "I seen you head down this way, so I thought you spotted a fare, and I chased after you."

They got into a wrangle above the distorted form. "Yeah, you're always chiselin' in on my hails. Follyn' me around. Can't ye get none o' your own?"

Striker crossed the street, teeth chattering, and turned and looked up the face of the building. Half the French window of 913 was open, and the room was lit up. All the rest of the line was dark, from the top floor down.

He crossed back to where the little group stood shivering and stamping their feet miserably. "He sure picked a night for it!" winced the cop. The cab driver opened his mouth a couple of seconds ahead of saying something, which was his speed, and the cop turned on him irritably. "Yeah, we know! You seen him coming down. Go home, will ya!"

Striker went in, rode up, and used his passkey on 913. The light was on, as he had ascertained from the street. He stood there in the doorway and looked around. Each of the 13's, in the St. Anselm, was a small room with private bath. There was an opening on each of the four sides of these rooms: the tall, narrow, old-fashioned room-door leading in from the hall; in the wall to the left of that, the door to the bath, of identical proportions; in the wall to the right of the hall door, a door giving into the clothes closet, again of similar measurements. These three panels were in the style of the Nineties, not your squat modern aperture. Directly opposite the room door was a pair of French windows looking out onto the street. Each of them matched the door measurements. Dark blue roller-shades covered the glass on the inside.



But Striker wasn't thinking about all that particularly, just then. He was interested only in what the condition

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of the room could tell him: whether it had been suicide or an accident. The only thing disturbed in the room was the bed, but that was not violently disturbed as by a struggle, simply normally disarranged as by someone sleeping. Striker, for some reason or other, tested the sheets with the back of his hand for a minute. They were still warm from recent occupancy. Hopper's trousers were neatly folded across the seat of a chair. His shirt and underclothes were draped over the back of it. His shoes stood under it, toe to toe and heel to heel. He was evidently a very neat person.

He had unpacked. He must have intended to occupy the room for the full week he had bargained for. In the closet, when Striker opened it, were his hat, overcoat, jacket, and vest, the latter three on separate hangers. The dresser drawers held his shirts and other linen. On top of the dresser was a white-gold wristwatch, a handful of change, and two folded squares of paper. One was a glossy handbill from the show the guest had evidently attended only two hours ago. *Saturday through Tuesday — the laugh riot, funniest, most tuneful picture of the year, "Hips Hips Hooray!" Also "Popeye the Sailor."* Nothing in that to depress anyone.

The other was a note on hotel stationery — *Hotel Management: Sorry to do this here, but I had to do it somewhere.*

It was unsigned. So it was suicide after all. One of the two window halves, the one to the right stood inward to the room. The one he had gone through.

"You the house man?" a voice asked from the doorway.

Striker turned and a precinct detective came in. You could tell he was that. He couldn't have looked at a dandelion without congenital suspicion or asked the time of day without making it a leading question. "Find anything?"

Striker handed over the note without comment.

Perry, the manager, had come up with him, in trousers and bathrobe. He was a stout, jovial-looking man ordinarily, but right now he was only stout. "He hadn't paid yet, either," he said ruefully to the empty room. He twisted the cord of his robe around one way, then he undid it and twisted it around the other way. He was very unhappy. He picked the wristwatch up gingerly by the end of its strap and dangled it close to his ear, as if to ascertain whether or not it had a good movement.

The precinct dick went to the window and looked down, opened the bath door and looked in, the closet door and looked in. He gave the impression of doing this just to give the customers their money's worth; in other words, as far as he was concerned, the note had clinched the case.

"It's the old suey, all right," he said and, bending over at the dresser, read aloud what he was jotting down. "James Hopper, Skun-Skunnect —"

Striker objected peevishly. "Why did he go to bed first, then get up

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and go do it? They don't usually do that. He took the room for a week, too."

The precinct man raised his voice, to show he was a police detective talking to a mere hotel dick, someone who in his estimation wasn't a detective at all. "I don't care if he took it for six months! He left this note and hit the sidewalk, didn't he? Whaddaya trying to do, make it into something it ain't?"

The manager said, "Ssh! if you don't mind," and eased the door to, to keep other guests from overhearing. He sided with the precinct man, the wish being father to the thought. If there's one thing that a hotel man likes less than a suicide, it's a murder. "I don't think there's any doubt of it."

The police dick stooped to reasoning with Striker. "You were the first one up here. Was there anything wrong with the door? Was it forced open or anything?"

Striker had to admit it had been properly shut; the late occupant's key lay on the dresser where it belonged at that very moment.

The police dick spread his hands, as if to say: "There you are, what more do you want?"

He took a last look around, decided the room had nothing more to tell him. Nor could Striker argue with him on this point. The room had nothing more to tell anyone. The dick gathered up Hopper's watch, change, and identification papers, to turn them over to the police property-clerk, until they were claimed by his nearest of kin. His baggage was left in there temporarily; the room was darkened and locked up once more.

Riding down to the lobby, the dick rubbed it in a little. "Here's how those things go," he said patronizingly. "No one got in there or went near him, so it wasn't murder. He left a note, so it wasn't an accident. The word they got for this is suicide. Now, y'got it?"

Striker held his palm up and fluttered it slightly. "Teacher, can I leave the room?" he murmured poignantly.

The stout manager, Perry, had a distrait, slightly anticipatory expression on his moon face now; in his mind it was the next day, he had already sold the room to someone else, and had the two dollars in the till. Heaven, to him, was a houseful of full rooms.

The body had already been removed from the street outside. Somewhere, across a coffee counter, a cab driver was saying: "I seen him coming down."

The city dick took his departure from the hotel, with the magnanimous assurance: "It's the depresh. They're poppin' off like popcorn all over the country this week. *I* ain't been able to cash my pay check since Monday."

Perry returned to his own quarters, with the typical managerial admonition, to Maxon and Striker, "Soft pedal, now, you two. Don't let this get around the house." He yawned with a sound like air brakes, going up in the elevator. You could still hear

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it echoing down the shaft after his feet had gone up out of sight.

"Just the same," Striker said finally, unasked, to the night clerk, "I don't care what that know-it-all says, Hopper didn't have suicide on his mind when he checked in here at 7:30. He saw a show that was full of laughs, and even came home whistling one of the tunes from it. We both heard him. He unpacked all his shirts and things into the bureau drawers. He intended staying. He went to bed first; I felt the covers, they were warm. Then he popped up all of a sudden and took this standing broadjump."

"Maybe he had a bad dream," Maxon suggested facetiously. His was a hardboiled racket. He yawned, muscularly magnetized by his boss's recent gape, and opened a big ledger. "Some of 'em put on a fake front until the last minute — whistle, go to a show, too proud to take the world into their confidence, and then — bang — they've crumpled. How do you or I know what was on his mind?"

And on that note it ended. As Maxon said, there was no accounting for human nature. Striker caught the sleepiness from the other two, widened his jaws terrifyingly, brought them together again with a click. And yet somehow, to him, this suicide hadn't run true to form.

He went back up to his own room again with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, that wasn't strong enough to do anything about, and yet that he couldn't altogether throw off. Like the feeling you get when you're working out a crossword puzzle and one of the words fills up the space satisfactorily, but doesn't seem to have the required meaning called for in the solution.

The St. Anselm went back to sleep again, the small part of it that had been awake. The case was closed.

People came and went from 913 and the incident faded into the limbo of half-forgotten things. Then in the early Fall of '34 the room came to specific attention again.

A young fellow in his early twenties, a college type, arrived in a roadster with just enough baggage for overnight. No reservation or anything. He signed on as Allan Hastings, Princeton, New Jersey. He didn't have to ask the desk if there were any shows. He knew his own way around. They were kind of full-up that weekend. The only red vacancy-tag in any of the pigeonholes was 913. Dennison gave him that — had no choice.

The guest admitted he'd been turned away from two hotels already. They all had the S.R.O. sign out. "It's the Big Game, I guess," he said.

"What Big Game?" Striker was incautious enough to ask.

"Where've you been all your life?" he grinned. But not offensively.

Some football game or other, the house dick supposed. Personally a crackling good super-science story still had the edge on 22 huskies squabbling over a pig's inflated hide, as far as he was concerned.

Hastings came back from the game

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still sober. Or if he'd had a drink it didn't show. "We lost," he said casually at the desk on his way up, but it didn't seem to depress him any. His phone, the operator reported later, rang six times in the next quarter of an hour, all feminine voices. He was apparently getting booked up solid for the rest of the weekend.

Two girls and a fellow, in evening clothes, called for him about nine. Striker saw them sitting waiting for him in the lobby, chirping and laughing their heads off. He came down in about five minutes, all rigged up for the merry-merry, even down to a white carnation in his lapel.

Striker watched them go, half wistfully. "That's the life," he said to the man behind the desk.

"May as well enjoy it while you can," said Dennison philosophically. "Here today and gone tomorrow."

Hastings hadn't come back yet by the time Striker went up and turned in. Not that Striker was thinking about him particularly, but he just hadn't seen him. He read a swell story about mermaids kidnaping a deep-sea diver, and dropped off to sleep.

The call came through to his room at about four thirty in the morning. It took him a minute or two to come out of the deep sleep he'd been in.

"Hurry it up, will you, Strike?" Maxon was whining impatiently. "The young guy in 913 has taken a flier out his window."

Striker hung up, thinking blurredly, "Where've I heard that before — 913?" Then he remembered — last year, from the very same room.

He filled the hollow of his hand with cold water from the washstand, dashed it into his eyes, shrugged into some clothing, and ran down the fire stairs at one side of the elevator shaft. That was quicker than waiting for the venerable mechanism to crawl up for him, then limp down again.

Maxon, who was a reformed drunk, gave him a look eloquent of disgust as Striker chased by the desk. "I'm getting off the wagon again if this keeps up — then I'll have some fun out of all these bum jolts."

There was more of a crowd this time. The weather was milder and there were more night-owls in the vicinity to collect around him and gape morbidly. The kid had fallen farther out into the street than Hopper — he didn't weigh as much, maybe. He was lying there face down in the shape of a Greek cross. He hadn't undressed yet, either. Only his shoes and dinner jacket had been taken off. One strap of his black suspenders had torn off, due to the bodily contortion of the descent or from the impact itself. The white of his shirt was pretty badly changed by now, except the sleeves. He'd had a good-looking face; that was all gone too. They were turning him over as Striker came up.

The same cop was there. He was saying to a man who had been on his way home to read the after-midnight edition of the coming morning's newspaper: "Lemme have your paper, Mac, will you?"

The man demurred, "I ain't read it

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myself yet. I just now bought it."

The cop said, "You can buy another. We can't leave him lying like this."

The thing that had been Hastings was in pretty bad shape. The cop spread the paper, separating the sheets, and made a long paper-covered mound. The stain even came through that a little, more like gasoline than anything else. Came through a headline that said something about the King of Jugoslavia being assassinated at Marseilles.

Striker thought, with a touch of mysticism, "Half a world away from each other this afternoon; now they're both together — somewhere — maybe."

The same precinct-dick showed up in answer to the routine notification that had been phoned in. His greeting to Striker was as to the dirt under his feet. "You still on the face of the earth?"

"Should I have asked your permission?" answered the hotel man drily.

Eddie Courlander — that, it seemed, was the police dick's tag — squatted down, looked under the pall of newspapers, shifted around, looked under from the other side.

"Peek-a-boo!" somebody in the small crowd said irreverently.

Courlander looked up threateningly. "Who said that? Gawan, get outa here, wise guys! If it happened to one of youse, you wouldn't feel so funny."

Somebody's night-bound coupé tried to get through, honked imperiously for clearance, not knowing what the obstruction was. The cop went up to it, said: "Get back! Take the next street over. There's a guy fell out of a window here."

The coupé drew over to the curb instead, and its occupants got out and joined the onlookers. One was a girl carrying a night club favor, a long stick topped with paper streamers. She squealed, "*Ooou, ooou-ooou,*" in a way you couldn't tell if she was delighted or horrified.

Courlander straightened, nodded toward Striker. "What room'd he have? C'mon in."

He didn't remember that it was the same one. Striker could tell that by the startled way he said, "Oh, yeah, that's right too!" when he mentioned the coincidence to him.

Perry and the night porter were waiting outside the room door. "I wouldn't go in until you got here," the manager whispered virtuously to the cop. "I know you people don't like anything touched." Striker, however, had a hunch there was a little superstitious fear at the back of this as well, like a kid shying away from a dark room.

"You're thinking of murder cases," remarked Courlander contemptuously. "Open 'er up."

The light was on again, like the previous time. But there was a great difference in the condition of the room. Young Hastings obviously hadn't had Hopper's personal neatness. Or else he'd been slightly lit up when he came in. The daytime

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clothes he'd discarded after coming back from the game were still strewn around, some on chairs, some on the floor. The St. Anselm didn't employ maids to straighten the rooms after five in the evening. His patent-leathers lay yards apart as though they had been kicked off into the air and left lying where they had come down. His bat-wing tie was a black snake across the carpet. There was a depression and creases on the counterpane on top of the bed, but it hadn't been turned down. He had therefore lain down on the bed, but not in it.

On the dresser top stood a glittering little pouch, obviously a woman's evening bag. Also his carnation, in a glass of water. Under that was the note. Possibly one of the shortest suicide notes on record. Three words. *What's the use?*

Courlander read it, nodded, showed it to them. "Well," he said, "that tells the story."

He shrugged.

In the silence that followed the remark, the phone rang sharply, unexpectedly. They all jolted a little, even Courlander. Although there was nobody in the room and never had been, it was a dead man's room. There was something macabre to the peal, like a desecration. The police dick halted Striker and the manager with a gesture.

"May be somebody for him," he said, and went over and took it. He said, "Hello?" in a wary, noncommittal voice. Then he changed to his own voice, said: "Oh. Have you told her yet? Well, send her up here. I'd like to talk to her."

He hung up, explained: "Girl he was out with tonight is down at the desk, came back to get her bag. He must have been carrying it for her. It has her latchkey in it and she couldn't get into her own home."

Perry turned almost unconsciously and looked into the dresser mirror to see if he needed a shave. Then he fastidiously narrowed the neck opening of his dressing gown and smoothed the hair around the back of his head, which was the only place he had any.

The dick shoved Hastings' discarded clothes in out of sight on the closet floor. This was definitely not a murder case, so there was no reason to shock the person he was about to question, by the presence of the clothes.

There was a short tense wait while she was coming up on the slow-motion elevator. Coming up to see someone that wasn't there at all. Striker said rebukingly, "This is giving it to her awful sudden, if she was at all fond of the guy."

Courlander unwittingly gave an insight into his own character when he said callously, "These girls nowadays can take it better than we can — don't worry."

The elevator panel ticked open, and then she came into the square of light thrown across the hall by the open doorway. She was a very pretty girl of about twenty-one or -two, tall and slim, with dark red hair, in a long white satin evening gown. Her eyes

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were wide with startled inquiry, at the sight of the three of them, but not frightened yet. Striker had seen her once before, when she was waiting for Hastings in the lobby earlier that evening. The other man of the original quartette had come up with her, no doubt for propriety's sake, and was standing behind her. They had evidently seen the second girl home before coming back here. And the side street where he had fallen was around the corner from the main entrance to the hotel.

She crossed the threshold, asked anxiously, "Is Allan — Is Mr. Hastings ill or something? The desk man said there's been a little trouble up here."

Courlander said gently, "Yes, there has." But he couldn't make anything sound gentle. The closest he could get to it was a sort of passive truculence.

She looked around. She was starting to get frightened now. She said, "What's happened to him? Where is he?" Then she saw the right half of the window standing open. Striker, who was closest to it, raised his arm and pushed it slowly closed. Then he just looked at her.

She understood, and whimpered across her shoulder, "Oh, Marty!" and the man behind her put an arm around her shoulder to support her.

They sat down. She didn't cry much — just sat with her head bent looking over at the floor. Her escort stood behind her chair, hands on her shoulders, bucking her up.

Courlander gave her a minute or two to pull herself together, then he started questioning. He asked them who they were. She gave her name. The man with her was her brother; he was Hastings' classmate at Princeton.

He asked if Hastings had had much to drink.

"He had a few drinks," she admitted, "but he wasn't drunk. Mart and I had the same number he did, and we're not drunk." They obviously weren't.

"Do you know of any reason, either one of you, why he should have done this?"

The thing had swamped them with its inexplicability, it was easy to see that. They just shook their heads dazedly.

"Financial trouble?"

The girl's brother just laughed — mirthlessly. "He had a banking business to inherit, some day — if he'd lived."

"Ill health? Did he study too hard, maybe?"

He laughed again, dismally. "He was captain of the hockey team, he was on the baseball team, he was the bright hope of the swimming team. Why should he worry about studying? Star athletes are never allowed to flunk."

"Love affair?" the tactless flatfoot blundered on.

The brother flinched at that. This time it was the girl who answered. She raised her head in wounded pride, thrust out her left hand.

"He asked me to marry him tonight.

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He gave me this ring. That was the reason for the party. Am I so hard to take?"

The police dick got red. She stood up without waiting to ask whether she could go or not. "Take me home, Mart," she said in a muffled voice. "I've got some back crying to catch up on."

Striker called the brother back again for a minute, while she went on alone toward the elevator; shoved the note before him. "Was that his handwriting?"

He pored over it. "I can't tell, just on the strength of those three words. I've never seen enough of it to know it very well. The only thing I'd know for sure would be his signature — he had a cockeyed way of ending it with a little pretzel twist — and that isn't on there." Over his shoulder, as he turned to go once more, he added: "That was a favorite catchword of his, though. 'What's the use?' I've often heard him use it. I guess it's him all right."

"We can check it by the register," Striker suggested after they'd gone.

The dick gave him a scathing look. "Is it your idea somebody else wrote his suicide note for him? That's what I'd call service!"

"Is it your idea he committed suicide the same night he got engaged to a production number like you just saw?"

"Is it your idea he didn't?"

"Ye-es," said Striker with heavy emphasis, "but I can't back it up."

"You bet you can't!"

The register showed a variation between the two specimens of handwriting, but not more than could be ascribed to the tension and nervous excitement of a man about to end his life. There wasn't enough to the note for a good handwriting expert to have got his teeth into with any degree of certainty.

"How long had he been in when it happened?" Striker asked Maxon.

"Not more than half an hour. Bob took him up a little before four."

"How'd he act? Down in the mouth, blue?"

"Blue nothing, he was tappin' out steps there on the mosaic, waitin' for the car to take him up."

Bob, the night man-of-all-work, put in his two cents' worth without being asked: "On the way up he said to me, 'Think this thing'll last till we get up there? I'd hate to have it drop me now. I got engaged tonight.'"

Striker flashed the police dick a triumphant look. The latter just stood by with the air of one indulging a precocious child. "Now ya through, little boy?" he demanded. "Why don't you quit trying to make a noise like a homicide dick and stick to your own little racket?

"It's a suicide, see?" continued the police dick pugnaciously, as though by raising his voice he was deciding the argument. "I've cased the room, and I don't care if he stood on his head or did somersaults before he rode up." He waved a little black pocket-notebook under Striker's nose. "Here's my report, and if it don't suit you,

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why don't you take it up with the Mayor?"

Striker said in an humble, placating voice: "Mind if I ask you something personal?"

"What?" said the precinct man sourly.

"Are you a married man?"

"Sure I'm married. What's that to — ?"

"Think hard. The night you became engaged, the night you first proposed to your wife, did you feel like taking your own life afterward?"

The police dick went "Arrrr!" disgustedly, flung around on his heel, and stalked out, giving the revolving door an exasperated twirl that kept it going long after he was gone.

"They get sore, when you've got 'em pinned down," Striker remarked wryly.

Perry remonstrated impatiently, "Why are you always trying to make it out worse than it is? Isn't it bad enough without looking for trouble?"

"If there's something phony about his death, isn't it worse if it goes undetected than if it's brought to light?"

Perry said, pointedly thumbing the still-turning door, "*That* was the police we just had with us."

"We were practically alone," muttered his disgruntled operative.

And so they couldn't blame it on the depression this time. That was starting to clear up now. And besides, Allan Hastings had come from well-to-do people. They couldn't blame it on love either. Perry half-heartedly tried to suggest he hadn't loved the girl he was engaged to, had had somebody else under his skin maybe, so he'd taken this way to get out of it.

"That's a woman's reason, not a man's," Striker said disgustedly. "Men don't kill themselves for love; they go out and get tanked, and hop a train for some place else, instead!" The others both nodded, probing deep within their personal memories. So that wouldn't wash either.

In the end there wasn't anything they could blame it on but the room itself. "That room's jinxed," Maxon drawled slurringly. "That's two in a row we've had in there. I think it's the thirteen on it. You oughta change the number to 912½ or 914½ or something, boss."

That was how the legend first got started.

Perry immediately jumped on him full-weight. "Now listen, I won't have any of that nonsense! There's nothing wrong with that room! First thing you know the whole hotel'll have a bad name, and then where are we? It's just a coincidence, I tell you, just a coincidence!"

Dennison sold the room the very second day after to a middle-aged couple on a visit to the city to see the sights. Striker and Maxon sort of held their breaths, without admitting it to each other. Striker even got up out of bed once or twice that first night and took a prowl past the door of 913, stopping to listen carefully. All he could hear was a sonorous baritone snore and a silvery soprano one, in peaceful counterpoint.

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The hayseed couple left three days later, perfectly unharmed and vowing they'd never enjoyed themselves as much in their lives.

"Looks like the spirits are lying low," commented the desk man, shoving the red vacancy-tag back into the pigeonhole.

"No," said Striker, "looks like it only happens to singles. When there's two in the room nothing ever happens."

"You never heard of anyone committing suicide in the presence of a second party, did you?" the clerk pointed out not unreasonably. "That's one thing they gotta have privacy for."

Maybe it had been, as Perry insisted, just a gruesome coincidence. "But if it happens a third time," Striker vowed to himself, "I'm going to get to the bottom of it if I gotta pull the whole place down brick by brick!"

The Legend, meanwhile, had blazed up high and furious with the employees; even the slowest-moving among them had a way of hurrying past Room 913 with sidelong glances and fetish mutterings when any duty called them to that particular hallway after dark. Perry raised hell about it, but he was up against the supernatural now; he and his threats of discharge didn't stack up at all against that. The penalty of repeating the rumor to a guest was instant dismissal if detected by the management. *If.*

Then just when the legend was languishing from lack of any further substantiation to feed upon, and was about to die down altogether, the room came through a third time!

The calendar read Friday, July 12th, 1935, and the thermometers all read 90-plus. He came in mopping his face like everyone else, but with a sort of professional good humor about him that no one else could muster just then. That was one thing that tipped Striker off he was a salesman. Another was the two bulky sample cases he was hauling with him until the bellboy took them over. A third was his ability to crack a joke when most people felt like eggs in a frying pan waiting to be turned over.

"Just rent me a bath without a room," he told Dennison. "I'll sleep in the tub all night with the cold water running over me."

"I can give you a nice inside room on the fourth." There were enough vacancies at the moment to offer a choice, these being the dog days.

The newcomer held up his hand, palm outward. "No thanks, not this kind of weather. I'm willing to pay the difference."

"Well, I've got an outside on the sixth, and a couple on the ninth."

"The higher the better. More chance to get a little circulation into the air."

There were two on the ninth, 13 and 19. Dennison's hand paused before 13, strayed on past it to 19, hesitated, came back again. After all, the room had to be sold. This was business, not a kid's goblin story. Even Striker could see that. And it was ten months now since — There'd been

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singles in the room since then, too. And they'd lived to check out again.

He gave him 913. But after the man had gone up, he couldn't refrain from remarking to Striker: "Keep your fingers crossed. That's the one with the jinx on it." As though Striker didn't know that! "I'm going to do a little more than that," he promised himself privately.

He swung the register around toward him so he could read it. *Amos J. Dillberry, City*, was inscribed on it. Meaning this was the salesman's headquarters when he was not on the road, probably. Striker shifted it back again.

He saw the salesman in the hotel dining-room at mealtime that evening. He came in freshly showered and laundered, and had a wisecrack for his waiter. That was the salesman in him. The heat certainly hadn't affected his appetite any, the way he stoked.

"If anything happens," thought Striker with gloomy foreboding, "that dick Courlander should show up later and try to tell me this guy was depressed or affected by the heat! He should just try!"

In the early part of the evening the salesman hung around the lobby a while, trying to drum up conversation with this and that sweltering fellow-guest. Striker was in there too, watching him covertly. For once he was not a hotel dick sizing somebody up hostilely, he was a hotel dick sizing somebody up protectively. Not finding anyone particularly receptive, Dillberry went out into the street about ten, in quest of a soul-mate.

Striker stood up as soon as he'd gone, and took the opportunity of going up to 913 and inspecting it thoroughly. He went over every square inch of it; got down on his hands and knees and explored all along the baseboards of the walls; examined the electric outlets; held matches to such slight fissures as there were between the tiles in the bathroom; rolled back one half of the carpet at a time and inspected the floorboards thoroughly; even got up on a chair and fiddled with the ceiling light fixture, to see if there was anything tricky about it. He couldn't find a thing wrong. He tested the windows exhaustively, working them back and forth until the hinges threatened to come off. There wasn't anything defective or balky about them, and on a scorching night like this the inmate was bound to leave them wide open and let it go at that, not fiddle around with them in any way during the middle of the night. There wasn't enough breeze, even this high up, to swing a cobweb.

He locked the room behind him, went downstairs again with a helpless dissatisfied feeling of having done everything that was humanly possible — and yet not having done anything at all, really. What was there he could do?

Dillberry reappeared a few minutes before twelve, with a package cradled in his arm that was unmistakably for refreshment purposes up in his room, and a conspiratorial expression on his face that told Striker's experienced eyes what was coming next. The sales-

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man obviously wasn't the solitary drinker type.

Striker saw her drift in about ten minutes later, with the air of a lady on her way to do a little constructive drinking. He couldn't place her on the guest list, and she skipped the desk entirely — so he bracketed her with Dillberry. He did exactly nothing about it — turned his head away as though he hadn't noticed her.

Maxon, who had just come on in time to get a load of this, looked at Striker in surprise. "Aren't you going to do anything about that?" he murmured. "She's not one of our regulars."

"I know what I'm doing," Striker assured him softly. "She don't know it, but she's subbing for night watchman up there. As long as he's not alone, nothing can happen to him."

"Oh, is that the angle? Using her for a chest protector, eh? But that just postpones the showdown — don't solve it. If you keep using a spare to ward it off, how you gonna know what it is?"

"That," Striker had to admit, "is just the rub. But I hate like the devil to find out at the expense of still another life."

But the precaution was frustrated before he had time to see whether it would work or not. The car came down almost immediately afterward, and the blonde was still on it, looking extremely annoyed and quenching her unsatisfied thirst by chewing gum with a sound like castanets. Beside her stood Manager Perry, pious determination transforming his face.

"Good night," he said, politely ushering her off the car.

"Y'couldda at least let me have one quick one, neat, you big overstuffed blimp!" quoth the departing lady indignantly. "After I helped him pick out the brand!"

Perry came over to the desk and rebuked his house-man: "Where are your eyes, Striker? How did you let that come about? I happened to spot her out in the hall waiting to be let in. You want to be on your toes, man."

"Sorry, chief," said Striker.

"So it looks like he takes his own chances," murmured Maxon, when the manager had gone up again.

"Then I'm elected, personally," sighed Striker. "Maybe it's just as well. Even if something had happened with her up there, she didn't look like she had brains enough to be able to tell what it was afterward."

In the car, on the way to his own room, he said, "Stop at nine a minute — and wait for me." This was about a quarter to one.

He listened outside 13. He heard a page rustle, knew the salesman wasn't asleep, so he knocked softly. Dillberry opened the door.

"Excuse me for disturbing you. I'm the hotel detective."

"I've been quarantined once tonight already," said the salesman, but his characteristic good humor got the better of him even now. "You can come in and look if you want to, but I know when I'm licked."

"No, it isn't about that." Striker

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wondered how to put it. In loyalty to his employer he couldn't very well frighten the man out of the place. "I just wanted to warn you to please be careful of those windows. The guard rail outside them's pretty low, and —"

"No danger," the salesman chuckled. "I'm not subject to dizzy spells and I don't walk in my sleep."

Striker didn't smile back. "Just bear in mind what I said, though, will you?"

Dillberry was still chortling good-naturedly. If he *did* lose his balance during the night and go out, thought Striker impatiently, it would be like him still to keep on sniggering all the way down.

"What are you worried they'll do — creep up on me and bite me?" kidded the salesman.

"Maybe that's a little closer to the truth than you realize," Striker said to himself mordantly. Looking at the black, night-filled aperture across the lighted room from them, he visualized it for the first time as a hungry, predatory maw, with an evil active intelligence of its own, swallowing the living beings that lingered too long within its reach, sucking them through to destruction, like a diabolic vacuum-cleaner. It looked like an upright, open black coffin there, against the cream-painted walls; all it needed was a silver handle at each end. Or like a symbolic Egyptian doorway to the land of the dead, with its severe proportions and pitch-black core and the hot, lazy air coming through it from the nether-world.

He was beginning to hate it with a personal hate, because it baffled him, it had him licked, had him helpless, and it struck without warning — an unfair adversary.

Dillberry giggled, "You got a look on your face like you tasted poison! I got a bottle here hasn't been opened yet. How about rinsing it out?"

"No, thanks," said Striker, turning away. "And it's none of my business, I know, but just look out for those windows if you've got a little something under your belt later."

"No fear," the salesman called after him. "It's no fun drinking alone. Too hot for that, anyway."

Striker went on up to his own room and turned in. The night air had a heavy, stagnant expectancy to it, as if it were just waiting for something to happen. Probably the heat, and yet he could hardly breathe, the air was so leaden with menace and sinister tension.

He couldn't put his mind to the "fantastic" magazine he'd taken to bed with him — he flung it across the room finally. "You'd think I knew, ahead of time!" he told himself scoffingly. And yet deny it as he might, he did have a feeling that tonight was going to be one of those times. Heat jangling his nerves, probably. He put out his light — even the weak bulb gave too much warmth for comfort — and lay there in the dark, chain-smoking cigarettes until his tongue prickled.

An hour ticked off, like drops of molten lead. He heard the hour of

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three strike faintly somewhere in the distance, finally. He lay there, tossing and turning, his mind going around and around the problem. What *could* it have been but two suicides, by coincidence both from the one room? There had been no violence, no signs of anyone having got in from the outside.

He couldn't get the infernal room off his mind; it was driving him nutty. He sat up abruptly, decided to go down there and take soundings. Anything was better than lying there. He put on shirt and pants, groped his way to the door without bothering with the light — it was too hot for lights — opened the door and started down the hall. He left the door cracked open behind him, to save himself the trouble of having to work a key on it when he got back.

He'd already rounded the turn of the hall and was at the fire door giving onto the emergency stairs, when he heard a faint trill somewhere behind him. The ding-a-ling of a telephone bell. Could that be his? If it was — He tensed at the implication. It kept on sounding; it must be his, or it would have been answered by now.

He turned and ran back, shoved the door wide open. It was. It burst into full-bodied volume, almost seemed to explode in his face. He found the instrument in the dark, rasped, "Hello?"

"Strike?" There was fear in Maxon's voice now. "It's — it's happened again."

Striker drew in his breath, and that was cold too, in all the heat of the stuffy room. "Nine-thirteen?" he said hoarsely.

"Nine-thirteen!"

He hung up without another word. His feet beat a pulsing tattoo racing down the hall. This time he went straight to the room, not down to the street. He'd seen too often what "they" looked like, down below, after they'd grounded. This time he wanted to see what that hell box, that four-walled coffin, that murder crate of a room looked like. Right after. Not five minutes or even two, but right after — as fast as it was humanly possible to get there. But maybe five minutes had passed, already; must have, by the time it was discovered, and he was summoned, and he got back and answered his phone. Why hadn't he stirred his stumps a few minutes sooner? He'd have been just in time, not only to prevent, but to see what it was — if there was anything to see.

He got down to the ninth, heat or no heat, in thirty seconds flat, and over to the side of the building the room was on. The door was yawning wide open, and the room light was out. "Caught you, have I?" flashed grimly through his mind. He rounded the jamb like a shot, poked the light switch on, stood crouched, ready to fling himself —

Nothing. No living thing, no disturbance.

No note either, this time. He didn't miss any bets. He looked into the closet, the bath, even got down and peered under the bed. He peered cautiously down from the lethal win-

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dow embrasure, careful where he put his hands, careful where he put his weight.

He couldn't see the street, because the window was too high up, but he could hear voices down there plainly in the still, warm air.

He went back to the hall and stood there listening. But it was too late to expect to hear anything, and he knew it. The way he'd come galloping down like a war-horse would have drowned out any sounds of surreptitious departure there might have been. And somehow, he couldn't help feeling there hadn't been any, anyway. The evil was implicit in this room itself — didn't come from outside, open door to the contrary.

He left the room just the way he'd found it, went below finally. Maxon straightened up from concealing something under the desk, drew the back of his hand recklessly across his mouth. "Bring on your heebie-jeebies," he said defiantly. "See if I care — now!"

Striker didn't blame him too much at that. He felt pretty shaken himself.

Perry came down one car-trip behind him. "I never heard of anything like it!" He was seething. "What kind of a merry-go-round is this anyway?"

Eddie Courlander had been sent over for the third time. Happened to be the only one on hand, maybe. The whole thing was just a monotonous repetition of the first two times, but too grisly — to Striker, anyway — to be amusing.

"This is getting to be a commutation trip for me," the police dick announced with macabre humor, stalking in. "The desk lieutenant only has to say, 'Suicide at a hotel,' and I say right away, 'The St. Anselm,' before he can tell me."

"Only it isn't," said Striker coldly. "There was no note."

"Are you going to start that again?" growled the city dick.

"It's the same room again, in case you're interested. Third time in a little over two years. Now, don't you think that's rubbing it in a little heavy?"

Courlander didn't answer, as though he *was* inclined to think that, but — if it meant siding with Striker — hated to have to admit it.

Even Perry's professional bias for suicide — if the alternative had to be murder, the *bête-noir* of hotel men — wavered in the face of this triple assault. "It does look kind of spooky," he faltered, polishing the center of his bald head. "All the rooms below, on that line, have those same floor-length windows, and it's never taken place in any of the others."

"Well, we're going to do it up brown this time and get to the bottom of it!" Courlander promised.

They got off at the ninth. "Found the door open like this, too," Striker pointed out. "I stopped off here on my way down."

Courlander just glanced at him, but still wouldn't commit himself. He went into the room, stopped dead-center and stood there looking around, the other two just behind him. Then he went over to the bed, fumbled a

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little with the covers. Suddenly he spaded his hand under an edge of the pillow, drew it back again.

"I thought you said there was no note?" he said over his shoulder to Striker.

"You not only thought. I did say that."

"You still do, huh?" He shoved a piece of stationery at him. "What does this look like — a collar button?"

It was as laconic as the first two. *I'm going to hell, where it's cool!* Unsigned.

"That wasn't in here when I looked the place over the first time," Striker insisted with slow emphasis. "That was planted in here between then and now!"

Courlander flung his head disgustedly. "It's white, isn't it? The bedclothes are white too, ain't they? Why don't you admit you missed it?"

"Because I know I didn't! I had my face inches away from that bed, bending down looking under it."

"Aw, you came in half-asleep and couldn't even see straight, probably!"

"I've been awake all night, wider awake than you are right now!"

"And as for your open door —" Courlander jeered. He bent down, ran his thumbnail under the panel close in to the jamb, jerked something out. He stood up exhibiting a wedge made of a folded-over paper match-cover. "He did that himself, to try to get a little circulation into the air in here."

Striker contented himself with murmuring, "Funny no one else's door was left open." But to himself he thought, ruefully, "It's trying its best to look natural all along the line, like the other times; which only proves it isn't."

The city dick answered, "Not funny at all. A woman alone in a room wouldn't leave her door open for obvious reasons; and a couple in a room wouldn't, because the wife would be nervous or modest about it. But why shouldn't a guy rooming by himself do it, once his light was out, and if he didn't have anything of value in here with him? That's why his was the only door open like that. The heat drove him wacky; and when he couldn't get any relief no matter what he did —"

"The heat did nothing of the kind. I spoke to him at twelve and he was cheerful as a robin."

"Yeah, but a guy's resistance gets worn down, it frays, and then suddenly it snaps." Courlander chuckled scornfully. "It's as plain as day before your eyes."

"Well," drawled Striker, "if this is your idea of getting to the bottom of a thing, baby, you're easily pleased! I'll admit it's a little more work to keep digging, than just to write down 'suicide' in your report and let it go at that," he added stingingly.

"I don't want any of your insinuations!" Courlander said hotly. "Trying to call me lazy, huh? All right," he said with the air of doing a big favor, "I'll play ball with you. We'll make the rounds giving off noises like a detective, if that's your idea."

"You'll empty my house for me," Perry whined.

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"Your man here seems to think I'm laying down on the job." Courlander stalked out, hitched his head at them to follow.

"You've never played the numbers, have you?" Striker suggested stolidly. "No number ever comes up three times in a row. That's what they call the law of averages. Three suicides from one room doesn't conform to the law of averages. And when a thing don't conform to that law, it's phony."

"You forgot your lantern slides, perfessor," sneered the police dick. He went next door and knuckled 915, first gently, then resoundingly.

The door opened and a man stuck a sleep-puffed face out at them. He said, "Whad-dye want? It takes me half the night to work up a little sleep and then I gotta have it busted on me!" He wasn't just faking being asleep — it was the real article; anyone could see that. The light hurt his eyes; he kept blinking.

"Sorry, pal," Courlander overrode him with a businesslike air, "but we gotta ask a few questions. Can we come in and look around?"

"No, ya can't! My wife's in bed!"

"Have her put something over her, then, 'cause we're comin'!"

"I'm leaving the first thing in the morning!" the man threatened angrily. "You can't come into my room like this, without a search warrant!" He thrust himself belligerently into the door opening.

"Just what have you got to hide, Mr. Morris?" suggested Striker mildly.

The remark had an almost magical effect on him. He blinked, digested the implication a moment, then abruptly swept the door wide open, stepped out of the way.

A woman was sitting up in bed struggling into a wrapper.

Courlander studied the wall a minute. "Did you hear any noise of any kind from the next room before you fell asleep?"

The man shook his head, said: "No."

"About how long ago did you fall asleep?"

"About an hour ago," said the man sulkily.

Courlander turned to the manager. "Go back in there a minute, will you, and knock on the wall with your fist from that side. Hit it good."

The four of them listened in silence; not a sound came through. Perry returned, blowing his breath on his stinging knuckles.

"That's all," Courlander said to the occupants. "Sorry to bother you." He and Striker went out again. Perry lingered a moment to try to smoothe their ruffled plumage.

They went down to the other side of the death chamber and tried 911. "This witch," said Perry, joining them, "has got ears like a dictaphone. If there was anything to hear, she heard it all right! I don't care whether you disturb her or not. I've been trying to get rid of her for years."

She was hatchet-faced, beady-eyed, and had a cap with a draw-string tied closely about her head. She seemed rather gratified at finding herself an

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object of attention, even in the middle of the night, as though she couldn't get anyone to listen to her most of the time.

"Asleep?" she said almost boastfully. "I should say not! I haven't closed my eyes all night." And then, overriding Courlander's attempt at getting in a question, she went on: "Mr. Perry, I know it's late, but as long as you're here, I want to show you something!" She drew back into the center of the room, crooked her finger at him ominously. "You just come here!"

The three men advanced alertly and jockeyed into positions from which they could see.

She swooped down, flung back a corner of the rug, and straightened up again, pointing dramatically. A thin film of dust marked the triangle of flooring that had just been bared. "What do you think of that?" she said accusingly. "Those maids of yours, instead of sweeping the dust *out* of the room, sweep it under the rug."

The manager threw his hands up over his head, turned, and went out. "The building could be burning," he fumed, "and if we both landed in the same firemen's net, she'd still roll over and complain to me about the service!"

Striker lingered behind just long enough to ask her: "You say you've been awake all night. Did you hear anything from the room next door, 913, during the past half-hour or so?"

"Why, no. Not a sound. Is there something wrong in there?" The avid way she asked it was proof enough of her good faith. He got out before she could start questioning him.

Courlander grinned, "I can find a better explanation even than the heat for him jumping, now," he remarked facetiously. "He musta seen *that* next door to him and got scared to death."

"That would be beautifully simple, wouldn't it?" Striker said cuttingly. "Let's give it one more spin," he suggested. "No one on either side of the room heard anything. Let's try the room directly underneath — 813. The closet and bath arrangement makes for soundproof side-partitions, but the ceilings are pretty thin here."

Courlander gave the manager an amused look, as if to say, "Humor him!"

Perry, however, rolled his eyes in dismay. "Good heavens, are you trying to turn my house upside-down, Striker? Those are the Youngs, our star guests, and you know it!"

"D'you want to wait until it happens a fourth time?" Striker warned him. "It'll bring on a panic if it does."

They went down to the hallway below, stopped before 813. "These people are very wealthy," whispered the manager apprehensively. "They could afford much better quarters. I've considered myself lucky that they've stayed with us. Please be tactful. I don't want to lose them." He tapped apologetically, with just two finger-nails.

Courlander sniffed and said, "What's that I smell?"

"Incense," breathed the manager.

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"*Sh!* Don't you talk out of turn now."

There was a rustling sound behind the door, then it opened and a young Chinese in a silk robe stood looking out at them. Striker knew him, through staff gossip and his own observation, to be not only thoroughly Americanized in both speech and manner but an American by birth as well. He was Chinese only by descent. He was a lawyer and made huge sums looking after the interests of the Chinese businessmen down on Pell and Mott Streets — a considerable part of which he lost again betting on the wrong horses, a pursuit he was no luckier at than his average fellow citizen. He was married to a radio singer. He wore horn-rimmed glasses.

"Hi!" he said briskly. "The Vigilantes! What's up, Perry?"

"I'm so sorry to annoy you like this," the manager began to whine.

"Skip it," said Young pleasantly. "Who could sleep on a night like this? We've been taking turns fanning each other in here. Come on in."

Even Striker had never been in the room before; the Youngs were quality folk, not to be intruded upon by a mere hotel-detective. A doll-like creature was curled up on a sofa languidly fanning herself, and a scowling Pekinese nestled in her lap. The woman wore green silk pajamas. Striker took note of a tank containing tropical fish, also a lacquered Buddha on a table with a stick of sandalwood burning before it.

Striker and Courlander let Perry put the question, since being tactful was more in his line. "Have you people been disturbed by any sounds coming from over you?"

"Not a blessed thing," Mrs. Young averred. "Have we, babe? Only that false-alarm mutter of thunder that didn't live up to its promise. But that came from outside, of course."

"Thunder?" said Striker, puzzled. "What thunder? How long ago?"

"Oh, it wasn't a sharp clap," Young explained affably. " 'Way off in the distance, low and rolling. You could hardly hear it at all. There was a flicker of sheet-lightning at the same time — that's how we knew what it was."

"But wait a minute," Striker said discontentedly. "I was lying awake in my room, and I didn't hear any thunder, at any time tonight."

"There he goes again," Courlander slurred out of the corner of his mouth to Perry.

"But your room's located in a different part of the building," Perry interposed diplomatically. "It looks out on a shaft, and that might have muffled the sound."

"Thunder is thunder. You can hear it down in a cellar, when there is any to hear," Striker insisted.

The Chinese couple good-naturedly refused to take offense. "Well, it was very low, just a faint rolling. We probably wouldn't have noticed it ourselves, only at the same time there was this far-off gleam of lightning, and it seemed to stir up a temporary breeze out there, like when a storm's due to break. I must admit we didn't

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feel any current of air here inside the room, but we both saw a newspaper or rag of some kind go sailing down past the window just then."

"No, that wasn't a —" Striker stopped short, drew in his breath, as he understood what it was they must have seen.

Perry was frantically signaling him to shut up and get outside. Striker hung back long enough to ask one more question. "Did your dog bark or anything, about the time this — 'promise of a storm' came up?"

"No, Shan's very well behaved," Mrs. Young said fondly.

"He whined, though," her husband remembered. "We thought it was the heat."

Striker narrowed his eyes speculatively. "Was it right at that same time?"

"Just about."

Perry and Courlander were both hitching their heads at him to come out, before he spilled the beans. When he had joined them finally, the city dick flared up: "What'd you mean by asking that last one? You trying to dig up spooks, maybe? — hinting that their dog could sense something? All it was is, the dog knew more than they did. It knew that wasn't a newspaper flicked down past their window. That's why it whined!"

Striker growled stubbornly, "There hasn't been any thunder or any lightning at any time tonight — I know what I'm saying! I was lying awake in my room, as awake as they were!"

Courlander eyed the manager maliciously. "Just like there wasn't any farewell note, until I dug it out from under the pillow."

Striker said challengingly, "You find me *one other person*, in this building or outside of it, that saw and heard that 'thunder and lightning' the same as they did, and we'll call it quits!"

"Fair enough. I'll take you up on that!" Courlander snapped. "It ought to be easy enough to prove to you that that wasn't a private preview run off in heaven for the special benefit of the Chinese couple."

"And when people pay two hundred a month, they don't lie," said Perry quaintly.

"We'll take that projecting wing that sticks out at right-angles," said the dick. "It ought to have been twice as clear and loud out there as down on the eighth. Or am I stacking the cards?"

"You're not exactly dealing from a warm deck," Striker said. "If it was heard below, it could be heard out in the wing, and still have something to do with what went on in 913. Why not pick somebody who was out on the streets at the time and ask him? There's your real test."

"Take it or leave it. I'm not running around on the street this hour of the night, asking people 'Did you hear a growl of thunder thirty minutes ago?' I'd land in Bellevue in no time!"

"This is the bachelor wing," Perry explained as they rounded the turn of the hall. "All men. Even so, they're entitled to a night's rest as well as

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anyone else. Must you disturb *everyone* in the house?"

"Not my idea," Courlander rubbed it in. "That note is still enough for me. I'm giving this guy all the rope he needs, that's all."

They stopped outside 909. "Peter the Hermit," said Perry disgustedly. "Aw, don't take him. He won't be any help. He's nutty. He'll start telling you all about his gold mines up in Canada."

But Courlander had already knocked. "He's not too nutty to know thunder and lightning when he hears it, is he?"

Bedsprings creaked, there was a slither of bare feet, and the door opened.

He was about sixty, with a mane of snow-white hair that fell down to his shoulders, and a long white beard. He had mild blue eyes, with something trusting and childlike about them. You only had to look at them to understand how easy it must have been for the confidence men, or whoever it was, to have swindled him into buying those worthless shafts sunk into the ground up in the backwoods of Ontario.

Striker knew the story well; everyone in the hotel did. But others laughed, while Striker sort of understood — put two and two together. The man wasn't crazy; he was just disappointed in life. The long hair and the beard, Striker suspected, were not due to eccentricity but probably to stubbornness; he'd taken a vow never to cut his hair or shave until those mines paid off. And the fact that he hugged his room day and night, never left it except just once a month to buy a stock of canned goods, was understandable too. He'd been "stung" once, so now he was leery of strangers, avoided people for fear of being "stung" again. And then ridicule probably had something to do with it too. The way that fool Courlander was all but laughing in his face right now, trying to cover it with his hand before his mouth, was characteristic.

The guest was down on the register as Atkinson, but no one ever called him anything but Peter the Hermit. At irregular intervals he left the hotel, to go "prospecting" up to his mine-pits, see if there were any signs of ore. Then he'd come back again disappointed, but without having given up hope, to retire again for another six or eight months. He kept the same room while he was away, paying for it just as though he were in it.

"Can we come in, Pops?" the city dick asked, when he'd managed to straighten his face sufficiently.

"Not if you're going to try to sell me any more gold mines."

"Naw, we just want a weather report. You been asleep or awake?"

"I been awake all night, practickly."

"Good. Now tell me just one thing. Did you hear any thunder at all, see anything like heat-lightning flicker outside your window, little while back?"

"Heat-lightning don't go with thunder. You never have the two together," rebuked the patriarch.

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"All right, all right," said Courlander wearily. "Any kind of lightning, plain or fancy, and any kind of thunder?"

"Sure did. Just once, though. Tiny speck of thunder and tiny mite of lightning, no more'n a flash in the pan. Stars were all out and around too. Darnedest thing I ever saw!"

Courlander gave the hotel dick a look that should have withered him. But Striker jumped in without waiting. "About this flicker of lightning. Which direction did it seem to come from? Are you sure it came from above and not" — he pointed meaningly downward — "from *below* your window?"

This time it was the Hermit who gave him the withering look. "Did you ever hear of lightning coming from below, son? Next thing you'll be trying to tell me rain falls up from the ground!" He went over to the open window, beckoned. "I'll show you right about where it panned out. I was standing here looking out at the time, just happened to catch it." He pointed in a northeasterly direction. "There. See that tall building up over thattaway? It come from over behind there — miles away, o' course — but from that part of the sky."

Courlander, having won his point, cut the interview short. "Much obliged, Pops. That's all."

They withdrew just as the hermit was getting into his stride. He rested a finger alongside his nose, trying to hold their attention, said confidentially: "I'm going to be a rich man one of these days, you wait'n see. Those mines o' mine are going to turn into a bonanza." But they closed the door on him.

Riding down in the car, Courlander snarled at Striker: "Now, eat your words. You said if we found one other person heard and saw that thunder and sheet-lightning —"

"I know what I said," Striker answered dejectedly. "Funny — private thunder and lightning that some hear and others don't."

Courlander swelled with satisfaction. He took out his notebook, flourished it. "Well, here goes, ready or not! You can work yourself up into a lather about it by yourself from now on. I'm not wasting any more of the city's time — or my own — on anything as self-evident as this!"

"Self-evidence, like beauty," Striker reminded him, "is in the eye of the beholder. It's there for some, and not for others."

Courlander stopped by the desk, roughing out his report. Striker, meanwhile, was comparing the note with Dillberry's signature in the book. "Why, this scrawl isn't anything like his John Hancock in the ledger!" he exclaimed.

"You expect a guy gone out of his mind with the heat to sit down and write a nice copybook hand?" scoffed the police dick. "It was in his room, wasn't it?"

This brought up their former bone of contention. "Not the first time I looked."

"I only have your word for that."

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"Are you calling me a liar?" flared Striker.

"No, but I think what's biting you is, you got a suppressed desire to be a detective."

"I think," said Striker with deadly irony, "you have too."

"Why, you —!"

Perry hurriedly got between them. "For heaven's sake," he pleaded wearily, "isn't it hot enough and messy enough, without having a fist fight over it?"

Courlander turned and stamped out into the suffocating before-dawn murk. Perry leaned over the desk, holding his head in both hands. "That room's a jinx," he groaned, "a hoodoo."

"There's nothing the matter with the room — there can't possibly be," Striker pointed out. "That would be against nature and all natural laws. That room is just plaster and bricks and wooden boards, and they can't hurt anyone — in themselves. Whatever's behind this is some human agency, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it if I gotta sleep in there myself!" He waited a minute, let the idea sink in, take hold of him, then he straightened, snapped his fingers decisively. "That's the next step on the program! I'll be the guinea pig, the white mouse! That's the only way we can ever hope to clear it up."

Perry gave him a bleak look, as though such foolhardiness would have been totally foreign to his own nature, and he couldn't understand anyone being willing to take such an eerie risk.

"Because I've got a hunch," Striker went on grimly. "It's not over yet. It's going to happen again and yet again, if we don't hurry up and find out what it is."

Now that the official investigation was closed, and there was no outsider present to spread rumors that could give his hotel a bad name, Perry seemed willing enough to agree with Striker that it wasn't normal and natural. Or else the advanced hour of the night was working suggestively on his nerves. "B-but haven't you any idea at all, just as a starting point," he quavered, "as to what it could be — if it is anything? Isn't it better to have some kind of a theory? At least know what to look for, not just shut yourself up in there blindfolded?"

"I could have several, but I can't believe in them myself. It could be extra-mural hypnosis — that means through the walls, you know. Or it could be fumes that lower the vitality, depress, and bring on suicide mania — such as small quantities of monoxide will do. But this is summertime and there's certainly no heat in the pipes. No, there's only one way to get an idea, and that's to try it out on myself. I'm going to sleep in that room myself tomorrow night, to get the *feel* of it. Have I your okay?"

Perry just wiped his brow, in anticipatory horror. "Go ahead if you've got the nerve," he said limply. "You wouldn't catch me doing it!"

Striker smiled glumly. "I'm curious — that way."

(*Continued on page 117*)

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ABOUT THE SAGE OF SAC PRAIRIE . . .

August Derleth is undoubtedly one of the most prolific writers in the United States, if not in the world. He averages from 750,000 to 1,000,000 words per year, and his range is impressively catholic — from serious novels, poetry, biography, and literary criticism to weird tales (his first efforts but still an active part of his work) and detective stories (including full-length mysteries about Judge Peck and short stories about Solar Pons).

Mr. Derleth's serious work is one of the most ambitious literary projects ever attempted — the saga of Sac Prairie (the fictional name, of course, for his home town, the place of his birth and the scene of his growing, Sauk City, Wisconsin). This Herculean labor — it is nothing less — will eventually comprise more than fifty books of which more than a dozen have already been published . . .

The tale below is the first short story about Judge Ephraim Peabody Peck. Actually, it was not written as part of the Sac Prairie saga. But when a writer is engaged in so many different fields of literature as Mr. Derleth — in the serious and in the entertaining, in the natural and in the supernatural — it is inevitable that characters will "cross lines" and scenes intermingle. So, while not intended as a segment of the Saga, this short-short can be said to exist on the perimeter of the larger work.

The story itself grew out of two circumstances — one a source of satisfaction, the other a source of irritation. The former inspirational force is Mr. Derleth's own annual hunting of morels. He has been at it for more than fifteen years, and last May, with the help of an associate at Arkham House (Mr. Derleth's own publishing house, specializing in books of fantasy, and publishing the finest books of their kind in America today), Mr. Derleth collected 7221 morels, most of which are still at hand, dried and ready for use. So you see, the author knows whereof he speaks . . . The source of irritation — to that your Editors plead guilty: we have prodded and goaded and otherwise bedeviled Mr. Derleth to lure Judge Peck into the short-story arena.

Judge Peck's debut in the short form was written by Mr. Derleth late one Monday night. It had been a hectic day, but no more hectic than most of Mr. Derleth's work days. What a dynamo of creative energy that man is! And what a prodigious amount of work he accomplishes! For on that average work-day Mr. Derleth had already devoted some time to the business affairs of Arkham House, had dictated replies to a small mountain of letters, had written three articles for an historical series in the Milwaukee "Sentinel," had read a full-length book, had composed a couple of poems, and had recorded the day's entries in his Sac Prairie Journal. All this and homicide too . . .

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?

by AUGUST DERLETH

DR. JASPER CONSIDINE'S car came around the corner and stopped before the house. The doctor pushed the felt hat back from his rubicund face and leaned out. "Want to come along out into the country? George Tomson's been found dead."

"Lorin? Want to come too?" Judge Ephraim Peabody Peck looked at me over his spectacles, his opaque eyes casual.

"Okay by me," I said.

We went out to the curb after the Judge had told his niece where he was going. He climbed into the front seat next to his old crony, and I got into the back.

"What happened?" asked the Judge as we started off.

Dr. Considine shrugged his heavy shoulders. "They found him in bed half an hour ago. It could have been anything — though it's his brother John who's got heart trouble and has to take it easy. A lucky thing, because John never liked work and George always did. Emma found him."

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"Tomsons?" said the Judge, without turning. "Oh, a couple of old bachelors and their spinster sister. Fairly well-to-do, but disagreeable. Crochety, rather. Can't seem to get along too well with one another, though John lives with his sister, Emma, and George lived alone."

"I never know what you mean by 'well-to-do' when you talk about Sac Prairie people," I said. "A lot of money?"

He laughed. "No. Just comfortable. Each one is or was worth probably as much as twenty-five thousand, exclusive of real estate. John might have a little less than the others, because he spends it more freely. Emma's the youngest, George was the closest — almost to parsimony, I'd say — and John the most careless with money. I drew up George's will not long ago; he leaves everything to Emma."

"That so?" said Dr. Considine with interest. "I don't know why some of these old bachelors don't leave their money to some community interest, like the school or the library, for instance."

"Probably nobody asks them," observed the Judge. "How old was George?"

"I think about sixty."

The surviving Tomsons waited on the porch of George Tomson's house, set well back from the highway, and backed by a cluster of long-unused farm buildings. Emma was a small, prim woman, with thin lips and a pinched face out of which her dark eyes looked like strangers. John was more portly, but tall. He had graying hair, and the veins of his face stood out.

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He was breathing fast, a laboring of excitement.

"He's inside, in bed," said Emma. She had come to her feet but John remained sitting in the rocker.

"Forgive me for not coming along," said John. "The shock's been bad enough. My heart, you know."

"Yes, take it easy, John," said Dr. Considine sharply, in passing. "No exercise whatever. You shouldn't have come over here at all."

The doctor knew his way around. He went through the kitchen and the dining room to the bedroom. We followed him. The light was on in the bedroom. George Tomson's body lay across the bed. The bedclothes were torn up quite a bit. It looked as if he had got up, put on the light, and tried to get out. Perhaps to call the doctor.

"It looks like convulsions," I said.

Dr. Considine nodded judiciously. He had already bent to his examination.

"I saw him two mornings ago when he was out hunting mushrooms," said Emma from the hall. "Then this morning when I walked over —" Her house, she explained needlessly, was a mile down the road.

"He appears to have died last night," said Dr. Considine.

"Yes," said Emma faintly.

"Mushrooms," murmured the Judge. "Did he often gather them, Miss Emma?"

"Oh, yes, Judge. He's been getting them for twenty years. Just morels, though. He wouldn't trust himself with any other kind."

Judge Peck smiled, but his eyes flickered.

"I don't know what this is," said Dr. Considine, puzzled. "There'll have to be an autopsy." He straightened up. "Better call Dr. Enderby down from Baraboo, Emma. I'll just have a look at the kitchen."

He went back into the kitchen. Some dishes still stood on the table, but those Tomson had used had been washed and stacked on one side of the sink. The dishes on the table were covered. Dr. Considine uncovered them one after the other. Cold steak. Cheese. Celery. Finally an unsavory-looking dark-colored mess.

"Ugh! What do these people eat?" I wanted to know.

"Morels," said Judge Peck. "But unusually dark, aren't they?"

"Yes," answered the doctor dubiously, his normally cheerful face wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Let's have a look at that," said the Judge.

He went over and got a plate, hunted up a long-handled spoon, and came back to the dish. Emma, coming from the telephone, stood on the threshold watching with marked disapproval on her severe features. John, too, had got up and come into the house; he stood just behind her, looking apprehensive, one hand held to his chest; his breathing was still labored. The Judge dipped a few mushrooms out of the dish and spread them on the plate. They were cut up.

"He fixed them in a butter sauce," said Emma. "That's the way he al-

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ways did. Maybe he parboiled them a little in salt water; then he poured water and all into the spider and fried them in butter."

Judge Peck took out another spoonful and emptied it on the plate. A third and fourth followed. He got another plate and went on. He hesitated over his seventh spoonful, until finally he got a fork and fished a piece of mushroom out of the mess. It was a good-sized, limp mass, a kind of chestnut-brown in color. He held it up without comment before Dr. Considine's eyes.

"Ah. *Gyromitra esculenta*," said the doctor.

"I thought so. Deadly, isn't it?"

Dr. Considine nodded. "Some people seem to have eaten it without ill effect. But the species is listed as poisonous. The poisonous principle is helvellic acid, soluble in hot water. But then, he used hot water."

"Cause of death?"

"I think so."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Emma.

"Everybody around here's been expecting that for years," said John. "I wouldn't touch them. Emma wouldn't, either."

Judge Peck looked at them speculatively for a moment. His opaque eyes seemed to pass them, looking beyond the walls into the distance. He stood quite still for almost a minute, his long frock-coat with its brass buttons bright in the May sunlight which streamed in through the windows, his green-tinted black umbrella tight in his hand like a weapon. I knew he was thinking of something Dr. Considine had not caught.

"Poor devil! He had a hard time of it," said the doctor. He turned to Emma. "Is Dr. Enderby coming?"

"Yes, Doctor. Right away. It'll take fifteen minutes or so yet, I expect."

"Miss Emma, you knew George had left everything to you, didn't you?" asked the Judge.

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"Why, yes. He told me when he made his will."

"He said he was going to."

"He and John always argued about things. But John and I get along — at least as well as we should. And I guess George figured John would have the benefit of it anyway, as long as he lived with me. I don't really need it. I've got money." She said this a little proudly.

The Judge nodded. He had that faraway look again, and his long, almost equine face, with its strong jaw and the pursed lips, was setting in an expression of firmness.

"I sometimes think there's no such thing as a fool-proof mushroom, Ephraim," said Dr. Considine, moving out of the kitchen to the front porch once more. "They call the morel that. But the *Gyromitra esculenta* is also called 'the false morel,' which is probably another way of saying that nature sets a trap for over-confident fools."

"You're philosophically inclined today, Jasper," said the Judge.

We followed him to the porch and off it, where he stood in the shade of a spreading elm tree. Miss Emma came out and sat down once more, this time in the rocker John had been using. John, too, came out, walking slowly, almost painfully; he came down the steps and leaned up against a nearby maple tree.

"Do you suppose any stranger lurking around here that morning or noon, or any visitor to George, would have been seen?" asked the Judge.

Dr. Considine looked at him queerly. "Perhaps."

"I should say absolutely," said the Judge pensively. "There is that all-seeing eye, Jasper."

But Dr. Considine was no longer listening. He had taken out his watch and was looking at it, muttering that it was high time Enderby had got here; so he could go on about his business.

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"So that anyone visiting here would have been seen. Because someone did come here while George was getting his last dinner ready."

"Eh? How do you know that?" asked Dr. Considine sharply.

"Because, in my mind's eye, I saw him," answered the Judge imperturbably, the hint of a grim smile lurking at his lips.

He walked away from us toward the place where John stood.

Dr. Considine looked at me, somewhat bewildered, as if to say, "You live with him, but I've known him longer and I still don't always know what he's up to."

What he was up to this time was clear. He bent to John Tomson's ear and whispered something. I saw Tomson's hand drop from his side; it hung there for a moment, shaking. I looked at his face. He was staring at the Judge. He was afraid. Only for a second, though — then he set out awkwardly running across the fields, away from the house.

Emma got up, her hand at her throat. "John! You shouldn't run!"

But he only ran faster.

"What on earth did you say to him?" demanded Dr. Considine.

"Not much, Jasper. I only asked him why he put that poisonous mushroom into his brother's dish — all cut up, too, so that George would hardly notice it in the frying-pan."

"For God's sake, Ephraim! What are you saying?"

"That John killed his brother. And he may very well kill his sister next."

"Ephraim!"

"Why, Jasper, John told us himself he had done it. He said, 'Everybody around here's been expecting that for years.' But that wasn't quite true, because John hadn't been expecting it, or he wouldn't have brought it about. And Emma put it clearly when she said that he never picked but that one kind of mushroom. Morels. You know what a morel looks like, Jasper. Its appearance resembles that of a smooth sponge. A *Gyromitra*, on the other hand, has brainlike convolutions. Only a fool could mistake them. Certainly no man who had been gathering only morels for twenty years could make such a mistake. George wasn't a fool. But John is."

"Why didn't you hold him?"

"Because I can't prove a word of it. I just know it's so. It has to be. And see him run! 'The guilty flee when no man pursueth!' I think we'll find out he hadn't any more money, and probably Miss Emma hasn't as much as she thinks she has, either. John could have managed that. Neither you nor I can do a thing to him, Jasper. But perhaps Providence can. There's Emma to think of — if he comes back."

They found John Tomson's body next day only two miles from George's house. His heart had given out. Nobody had to tell me that was the way the Judge had planned it . . .

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Stephen McKenna, British novelist, has traveled over most of the face of the earth — Europe, Asia, Africa, America — chiefly in search of a warm climate; his health has always been frail. Now he is living in London again, with a country home in Berkshire, where he indulges the three great passions of his life: writing (usually in the morning); walking (usually in the afternoon); and the opera (every night throughout the season). Born of a wealthy family — of financiers and statesmen — it is not surprising that Mr. McKenna chooses to delineate the sophistication and solemnity, the pomp and circumstance, of English social and political life. His books are extremely popular in the United Kingdom — they have what is usually referred to as "class appeal."

The story we now present, despite its opening atmosphere of a snobbish London club, is most untypical of Mr. McKenna's special bent. True, "Local Rules" starts in the Eccentric Club — so exclusive that viceroys, admirals, and cabinet ministers merely constitute an oppressed minority, so exclusive that bishops are blackballed with impunity; but the scene shifts quickly to another club — the Cosmopolis, in (of all places!) Kansas City. And from that point on, the tale is American to the core.

In fact, this story is a lallapaloosa — in both meanings of that typically American word. . . .

LOCAL RULES

by STEPHEN McKENNA

IT IS the boast of the Eccentric Club that no two of its members are drawn from the same profession and that no profession is left unrepresented. Unlike any other club in London, it shelters a single undischarged bankrupt who would probably be expelled by a general resolution if he obtained his discharge, for he would then become the second company-promoter. There is one architect and there is one bookmaker; one osteopath and one stockbroker; one actor-manager and one county-court judge.

To this blend of catholicity and exclusiveness the rules of the club contribute, indeed, nothing; but the members feel — and do not hesitate to say — that, while one examining chaplain is an experience, two are a habit, and three a crowd. The doubtful pleasure of social intercourse, for which most clubs are constituted, becomes difficult of attainment when the management of the club de-

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generates into government of lieutenant-generals by lieutenant-generals; viceroys, admirals, and cabinet ministers become an oppressed minority; bishops are blackballed; and even the lieutenant-generals are bored with one another.

It was to secure an escape from this warfare of class against class that the Eccentric Club was founded; and for a dozen years it has afforded unrivaled opportunities for a warfare of individual against individual. A visitor to the card room on a summer evening of 1917 might have counted, in one corner, a former prime minister, a bill-broker, a poet, and the editor of a widely-read paper on bee-keeping. All were quarreling over their game. In the middle of the room the one theatrical costumier was playing piquette with the one marine engineer and disputing the score. The one iron-king was seated on the fringe of a bridge-foursome in another corner, waiting to cut in. The one lexicographer was partnered with the one millionaire against the one examining chaplain and the one private secretary. All were considering whether even the iron-king could make their game more intolerable; and the iron-king was already hating them all in advance as possible partners.

"Four spades," snapped the examining chaplain.

"No," growled the millionaire unamiably, glaring at an unrivaled collection of the smaller denominations.

When the cards were dealt, he seemed — through force of habit — to have got in on the ground floor and — most unexpectedly — to have stayed there.

"No-p," echoed the private secretary demurely, with the unruffled smile that he always assumed after going down several hundred points.

"And no," sighed the lexicographer. "The millionaire leads."

The private secretary put down his hand, rang for a whiskey-and-soda and dropped into an empty chair beside the iron-king, who incontinently turned away and buried his face in an illustrated paper.

"One never sees the remount-officer here nowadays," he began conversationally, bringing out his cigarette case and throwing one carefully creased trouser-leg over the other. "He's about due back now, isn't he?"

"He's considerably overdue," said the iron-king grimly and without looking up. "And when I last saw him, he didn't look like coming home in any great hurry."

He buried himself more deeply in his paper with the air of a man who did not wish to prolong the discussion. Glancing over his shoulder, the private secretary noted that the paper was only a trade-journal and that the iron-king was holding it upside down.

"He was sent over by the War Office to buy horses, wasn't he?" he asked. "I always said that the Americans would find he'd come to sell them a pup. Ha! Ha!" After a disconcerting silence, he reiterated, in

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a tone of entreaty: "*Buy* horses. *Sell* pups."

The iron-king pretended for a moment to study the mechanism of an inverted hydraulic-crane.

"That was always one of your best jokes," he observed disparagingly.

"It wasn't a joke at all," said the private secretary stiffly.

"But none of us dared tell you so," confessed the iron-king. "As a matter of fact, there was a certain truth in the remark. The remount-officer *did* try to sell them a pup. That's why he's overdue."

The private secretary took his whiskey-and-soda, ordered another for the iron-king, and prepared himself for the story.

"Who persuaded the remount-officer that he could play poker?" demanded the iron-king aggressively. "It must have been someone who had never played with him, I imagine; probably someone who had had a run of bad luck and had heard of him for the first time. Heaven knows, I'm no player; but the first night out on the *Scorbutic* I discovered that I'd forgotten more than he'd ever learned. I'm no player, but I know it; the trouble with the remount-officer was that he thought he could play, and went on thinking it at anything from twenty-five to thirty pounds a night the whole way over. He still thought it, when we reached New York; and I went out of my way to advise him to stick to horses and leave poker alone in the States."

He threw away his trade-journal and shrugged his shoulders compassionately.

"You can never convince a man that he hasn't a sense of humor," he resumed, "and I believe it's as hard to teach any man that he can't play poker. The Yankees tried from the moment he landed; they reasoned with him into the Middle West; and he was still buying experience at their price when we met two months later in Kansas City. I dined with him and a number of men on my way east, and after dinner he pulled up a table and said:

" 'Do any of you guys know anything about poker?'

"One or two hinted that they'd heard of the game, and in less time than it takes to tell we were hard at work. I don't know if you're well acquainted with Kansas City, but I can assure you that poker isn't the least bit of a new game there. All those fellows played well; and the best of them, a hard-bitten, wiry little lawyer from Denver, would take some beating in any country I've ever visited. When he got the cards, he won; and when he didn't get them, it's my belief that he . . . Well, I don't want to do any man an injustice, but there was one moment when three aces of diamonds were on the table at the same time. It may have been the fault of the shuffling . . . or it may have been a bad deck.

"So far as I remember, I didn't win or lose anything to write home about, the remount-officer got into

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difficulties from the start. He was buying more chips before we settled into our chairs, and at the end of two hours he was signing checks every fourth hand. When he picked up anything worth having, he gave himself away with a grin that you could hear the other end of Kansas City; and when he had nothing, he seemed to think he could make up for it with bluff that wouldn't deceive a nursery-governess. So far as the rest of us were concerned, it was legalized robbery; but he'd asked if anyone knew anything about poker. The Americans are nature's gentlemen, and they were just showing him.

"We'd played for about three hours, when I heard the remount-officer beginning to smile. The cards were the least little bit lumpy, and I stood out to see what would happen. Most of the others fell away before long, and the remount-officer and the Denver lawyer had the field to themselves. They bet and bet until we began to think that we shouldn't get another look-in that night; but at last the Denver man grew impatient and said he'd see. The remount-officer's hand went down, and we all craned forward to have a look: a royal flush!

"The Denver man twisted his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and smiled.

" 'Guess you gotter pay,' he drawled.

"Then he spread out his hand: three and five of hearts, seven of diamonds, four of spades, and six of clubs.

" 'What kind of hand d'you call that?' asked the remount-officer.

" 'An irregular missing-sequence,' said the Denver man, tilting his chair back and propping the soles of his shoes against the table. 'Sequence of alternating colors. You're not giving out that you've never seen that before?'

"The remount-officer looked round like the man who had fallen among thieves.

" 'There's no such hand!' he cried.

"The Denver man jerked his head backwards in the direction of the door, where there was a printed foolscap-sheet: *Laws of Poker: Cosmopolis Club, Kansas City.*

" 'Rule Thirty-seven, I think it is,' he said.

"The remount-officer walked to the door like a man ascending the scaffold. There it was, sure enough. '*Rule Thirty-seven.* The irregular missing-sequence (a five-card sequence in alternating colors) beats all other hands.' "

The iron-king made a swimming gesture with his hands.

"I'll say this for our friend," he went on. "He took punishment like a sportsman. There was a moment when you could hear him changing color (there was nothing restful about his emotions); then he steadied himself and came back to the table.

" 'I'd not met the rule before,' was all he said, swallowing hard.

From the other end of the room the lexicographer was scoring aloud.

"A hundred. And what about hon-

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ors?" he asked. "Come on, private secretary, it's your deal."

"Deal for me," called back the private secretary.

"It was a curious evening's play," resumed his companion, "and all things considered, I don't want to go through it again. I'd had as much as I wanted after another hour, and I was getting on my coat and preparing to go home to bed when the remount-officer beckoned to me. I looked at his hand; and you'll hardly believe me when I tell you that it was now *his* turn. *He'd* got an irregular missing-sequence.

"I waited to see the hand out. There was pretty general betting at first, but before long only the Denver man was left in. He and the remount-officer went at it hammer and tongs; there were no limits or any nonsense of that kind; after three minutes' quick, concentrated work the remount-officer stood to win back all he'd lost, and more. Then the Denver man pulled out his watch, muttered something about his wife and said he'd see him.

" 'You've given me my revenge,' said the remount-officer between his teeth, as he put down the irregular missing-sequence.

"The Denver man flipped his cards onto the table, one by one: four aces and a three.

" 'Guess you gotter pay,' he drawled.

" 'The irregular missing-sequence beats all other hands,' quoted the remount-officer.

"I'd seen my friend win and there was no point in my staying out of bed any longer; but something in the Denver man's expression kept me where I was.

" 'You've played this game before, I guess,' he expostulated a little wearily. 'I reckon you'll find all the information you can use under Rule Forty-nine.'

"The remount-officer walked to the door, with the tail of his eye watching the others, as if he expected them to sandbag him. Rule Forty-nine was incapable of misconception; it said, 'The hand known as the irregular missing-sequence (a five-card sequence in alternating colors) may never be claimed more than once in a single evening.'

The voices at the bridge-table were becoming clamorous, and the private secretary dragged himself reluctantly from his chair.

"But what happened?" he asked. "Did he pay?"

"We shall never be certain," answered the iron-king. "Knowing the man as I do, I am confident that he meant to. His hand was moving resignedly to his pocket, but the Denver man misunderstood the gesture and fired first. Death was almost instantaneous, but I felt it imprudent to wait longer. The Denver man was a lawyer, as I told you; I've no sort of doubt that he made good his claim against the estate. But you're quite right; the remount-officer is much overdue. He ought to have been back some weeks ago."

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In a review of Graham Greene's NINETEEN STORIES, *in "The New York Times Book Review" of February 13, 1949, Donald Barr had something to say parenthetically about the hardboiled school. Donald Barr was described at the end of the review as "a young scholar and essayist, an instructor in English at Columbia University."*

Mr. Barr wrote: "the crimes [in Graham Greene's stories] are more shocking than a dozen murders in a detective story, or the cheap mechanical swaggering sadism of the Cain-Hammett school."

Now, those three adjectives are mighty perceptive, and they apply to much that has been written by the hardboileders. But it is unfair on Mr. Barr's part to make such a sweeping condemnation of the entire school. It just happens that both James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett have written stories that are not cheap, not mechanical, not swaggering, and not sadistic.

For example, here is an early Hammett short story. It was written twenty-five years ago, yet in the same period in which Hammett wrote RED HARVEST *and* THE MALTESE FALCON. *Would Mr. Barr use the same adjectives about "The Man Who Killed Dan Odams"?*

THE MAN WHO KILLED DAN ODAMS

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

WHEN the light that came through the barred square foot of the cell's one high window had dwindled until he could no longer clearly make out the symbols and initials his predecessors had scratched and penciled on the opposite wall, the man who had killed Dan Odams got up from the cot and went to the steel-slatted door.

"Hey, chief!" he called, his voice rumbling within the narrow walls.

A chair scraped across a floor in the front of the building, deliberate footsteps approached, and the marshal of Jingo came into the passage between his office and the cell.

"I got something I want to tell you," the man in the cell said. "Something that —"

Then the marshal was near enough to see in the dim light the shiny muzzle of a short, heavy revolver threatening him from just in front of the prisoner's right hip.

Without waiting for the time-honored order the marshal raised his hands until their palms were level with his ears.

The man behind the bars spoke in a curt whisper.

"Turn around! Push your back against the door!"

When the marshal's back pressed

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against the bars a hand came up under his left armpit, pulled aside his unbuttoned vest, and plucked his revolver from its holster.

"Now unlock this here door!"

The prisoner's own weapon had disappeared and the captured one had taken its place. The marshal turned around, lowered one hand, keys jingled in it, and the cell door swung open.

The prisoner backed across the cell, inviting the other in with a beckoning flip of the gun in his hand.

"Flop on the bunk, face down."

In silence the marshal obeyed. The man who had killed Dan Odams bent over him. The long black revolver swept down in a swift arc that ended at the base of the prone official's head.

His legs jerked once, and he lay still.

With unhurried deftness the prisoner's fingers explored the other's pockets, appropriating money, tobacco, and cigarette papers. He removed the holster from the marshal's shoulder and adjusted it to his own. He locked the cell door behind him when he left.

The marshal's office was unoccupied. Its desk gave up two sacks of tobacco, matches, an automatic pistol, and a double handful of cartridges. The wall yielded a hat that sat far down on the prisoner's ears, and a too-tight, too-long, black rubber slicker.

Wearing them he essayed the street.

The rain, after three days of uninterrupted sovereignty, had stopped for the time. But Jingo's principal thoroughfare was deserted — Jingo ate between five and six in the evening.

His deep-set maroon eyes — their animality emphasized by the absence of lashes — scanned the four blocks of wooden-sidewalked street. A dozen automobiles were to be seen, but no horses.

At the first corner he left the street and half a block below turned into a muddy alley that paralleled it. Under a shed in the rear of a pool-room he found four horses, their saddles and bridles hanging nearby. He selected a chunky, well-muscled roan — the race is not to the swift through the mud of Montana — saddled it, and led it to the end of the alley.

Then he climbed into the saddle and turned his back on the awakening lights of Jingo.

Presently he fumbled beneath the slicker and took from his hip pocket the weapon with which he had held up the marshal: a dummy pistol of molded soap, covered with tinfoil from cigarette packages. He tore off the wrapping, squeezed the soap into a shapeless handful, and threw it away.

The sky cleared after a while and the stars came out. He found that the road he was traveling led south. He rode all night, pushing the roan unrelentingly through the soft, viscid footing.

At daylight the horse could go no farther without rest. The man led it up a coulee — safely away from the road — and hobbled it beneath a

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clump of cottonwoods, where the new grass peeped out through what rain and chinook had spared of the snow.

Then he climbed a hill and sprawled on the soggy ground, his lashless red eyes on the country through which he had come: rolling hills of black and green and gray, where wet soil, young grass, and dirty snow divided dominion — the triple rule trespassed here and there by the sepia ribbon of county road winding into and out of sight.

He saw no man while he lay there, but the landscape was too filled with the marks of man's proximity to bring any feeling of security. Shoulder-high wire fencing edged the road, a footpath cut the side of a nearby hill, telephone poles held their short arms stiffly against the gray sky.

At noon he saddled the roan again and rode on along the coulee. Several miles up he came to a row of small poles bearing a line of telephone wire. He left the coulee bottom, found the ranch house to which the wire ran, circled it, and went on.

Late in the afternoon he was not so fortunate.

With lessening caution — he had seen no wires for more than an hour — he rode across a hill to stumble almost into the center of a cluster of buildings. Into the group, from the other side, ran a line of wire.

The man who had killed Dan Odams retreated, crossed to another hill, and as he dropped down on the far side, a rifle snapped from the slope he had just quit.

He bent forward until his nose was deep in the roan's mane, and worked upon the horse with hand and foot.

The rifle snapped again.

He rolled clear of the horse as it fell, and continued to roll until bunch grass and sage brush screened him from behind. Then he crawled straight away, rounded the flank of a hill, and went on.

The rifle did not snap again. He did not try to find it.

He turned from the south now, toward the west, his short, heavy legs pushing him on toward where Tiger Butte bulked against the leaden sky like a great crouching cat of black and green, with dirty white stripes where snow lay in coulee and fissure.

His left shoulder was numb for a while, and then the numbness was replaced by a searing ache. Blood trickled down his arm, staining his mud-caked hand. He stopped to open coat and shirt and readjust the bandage over the wound in his shoulder — the fall from the horse had broken it open and started it bleeding again.

Then he went on.

The first road he came to bent up toward Tiger Butte. He followed it, plowing heavily through the sticky, clinging mud, his dirt-smeared face set grimly.

Only once did he break the silence he had maintained since his escape from the Jingo jail. He stopped in the middle of the road and stood with legs far apart, turned his bloodshot eyes from right to left and from ground to sky, and without emotion but with

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utter finality cursed the mud, the fence, the telephone wires, the man whose rifle had set him afoot, and the meadow larks whose taunting flute-like notes mocked him always from just ahead.

Then he went on; pausing after each few miles to scrape the ever accumulating mud from his boots; using each hilltop to search the country behind for signs of pursuit.

The rain came down again, matting his thin clay-plastered hair — his hat had gone with his mount. The ill-fitting slicker restricted his body and flapped about his ankles, impeding his progress, but his wounded shoulder needed its protection from the rain.

Twice he left the road to let vehicles pass — once a steaming Ford; once a half-load of hay creeping along behind four straining horses.

His way was still through fenced land that offered scant concealment. Houses dotted the country, with few miles between them; and the loss of his horse was ample evidence that the telephone wires had not been idle. He had not eaten since noon of the previous day but — notwithstanding the absence of visible pursuit — he could not forage here.

Night was falling as he left the road for the slope of Tiger Butte. When it was quite dark he stopped. The rain kept up all night. He sat through it — his back against a boulder, the slicker over his head, smoking and dozing.

The shack, unpainted and ramshackle, groveled in a fork of the coulee. Smoke hung soddenly, lifelessly above its roof, not trying to rise, until beaten into nothingness by the rain. The structures around the chimneyed shack were even less lovely. The group seemed asprawl in utter terror of the great cat upon whose flank it found itself.

But to the red eyes of the man who had killed Dan Odams — he lay on his belly on the crest of the hill around which the coulee split — the lack of telephone wires gave this shabby homestead a wealth of beauty beyond reach of architect or painter.

Twice within the morning hour that he lay there a woman came into view. Once she left the shack, went to one of the other sheds, and then returned. The other time she came to the door, to stand a while looking down the coulee. She was a small woman, of age and complexion indeterminable through the rain, in a limp, grayish dress.

Later, a boy of ten or twelve came from the rear of the house, his arms piled high with kindling, and passed out of sight.

Presently the watcher withdrew from his hill, swung off in a circle, and came within sight of the shack again from the rear.

Half an hour passed. He saw the boy carrying water from a spring below, but he did not see the woman again.

The fugitive approached the buildings stealthily, his legs carrying him stiffly, their elasticity gone. Now and then his feet faltered under him. But

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under its layers of clay and three-day beard his jaw jutted with nothing of weakness.

Keeping beyond them, he explored the outbuildings — wretched, flimsy structures, offering insincere pretenses of protection to an abject sorrel mare and a miscellaneous assortment of farm implements, all of which had come off second-best in their struggle with the earth. Only the generous, though not especially skillful, application of the material which has given to establishments of this sort the local sobriquet "hay-wire outfit" held the tools from frank admission of defeat.

Nowhere did the ground hold the impression of feet larger than a small woman's or a ten- or twelve-year-old boy's.

The fugitive crossed the yard to the dwelling, moving with wide-spread legs to offset the unsteadiness of his gait. With the unhurried, unresting spacing of clock-ticks fat drops of blood fell from the fingers of his limp left hand to be hammered by the rain into the soggy earth.

Through the dirty pane of a window he saw the woman and boy, sitting together on a cot, facing the door.

The boy's face was white when the man threw the door open and came into the unpartitioned interior, and his mouth trembled; but the woman's thin, sallow face showed nothing — except, by its lack of surprise, that she had seen him approaching. She sat stiffly on the cot, her hands empty and motionless in her lap, neither fear nor interest in her faded eyes.

The man stood for a time where he had halted — just within the door to one side — a grotesque statue modeled of mud. Short, sturdy-bodied, with massive sagging shoulders. Nothing of clothing or hair showed through his husk of clay, and little of face or hands. The marshal's revolver in his hand, clean and dry, took on by virtue of that discordant immaculateness an exaggerated deadliness.

His eyes swept the room: two cots against the undressed board sidewalls, a plain deal table in the center, rickety kitchen chairs here and there, a battered and scratched bureau, a trunk, a row of hooks holding an indiscriminate assembly of masculine and feminine clothing, a pile of shoes in a corner, an open door giving access to a lean-to-kitchen.

He crossed to the kitchen door, the woman's face turning to follow him.

The lean-to was empty. He confronted the woman.

"Where's your man?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Don't know."

"When'll he be back?"

"Ain't coming back."

The flat, expressionless voice of the woman seemed to puzzle the fugitive, as had her lack of emotion at his entrance. He scowled, and turned his eyes — now redder than ever with flecks of blood — from her face to the boy's and back to hers.

"Meaning what?" he demanded.

"Meaning he got tired of homesteading."

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He pursed his lips thoughtfully. Then he went to the corner where the shoes were piled. Two pairs of men's worn shoes were there — dry and without fresh mud.

He straightened, slipped the revolver back into its holster, and awkwardly took off the slicker.

"Get me some grub."

The woman left the cot without a word and went into the kitchen. The fugitive pushed the boy after her, and stood in the doorway while she cooked coffee, flapjacks, and bacon. Then they returned to the living-room. She put the food on the table and with the boy beside her resumed her seat on the cot.

The man wolfed the meal without looking at it — his eyes busy upon door, window, woman, and boy, his revolver beside his plate. Blood still dripped from his left hand, staining table and floor. Bits of earth were dislodged from his hair and face and hands and fell into his plate, but he did not notice them.

His hunger appeased, he rolled and lit a cigarette, his left hand fumbling stiffly through its part.

For the first time the woman seemed to notice the blood. She came around to his side.

"You're bleeding. Let me fix it."

His eyes — heavy now with the weights of fatigue and satisfied hunger — studied her face suspiciously. Then he leaned back in his chair and loosened his clothes, exposing the week-old bullet-hole.

She brought water and cloths, and bathed and bandaged the wound. Neither of them spoke again until she had returned to the cot and he had buttoned his shirt.

Then:

"Had any visitors lately?"

"Ain't seen nobody for six or seven weeks."

"How far's the nearest phone?"

"Nobel's — eight miles up the coulee."

"Got any horses besides the one in the shed?"

"No."

He got up wearily and went to the bureau, pulling the drawers out and plunging his hands into them. In the top one he found a revolver, and pocketed it. In the trunk he found nothing. Behind the clothes on the wall he found a rifle. The cots concealed no weapons.

He took two blankets from one of the cots, the rifle and his slicker. He staggered as he walked to the door.

"I'm going to sleep a while," he said thickly, "out in the shed where the horse is at. I'll be turning out every now and then for a look around, and I don't want to find nobody missing. Understand?"

She nodded, and made a suggestion.

"If any strangers show up, I guess you want to be woke up before they see you?"

His sleep-dull eyes became alive again, and he came unsteadily back to thrust his face close to hers, trying to peer behind the faded surfaces of her eyes.

"I killed a fellow in Jingo last

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week," he said after a while; talking slowly, deliberately, in a monotone that was both cautioning and menacing. "It was fair shooting. He got me in the shoulder before I downed him. But he belonged in Jingo and I don't. The best I could expect is the worst of it. I got a chance to get away before they took me to Great Falls, and I took it. And I ain't figuring on being took back there and hung. I ain't going to be here long, but while I am —"

The woman nodded again.

He scowled at her, started to speak, changed his mind, and left the shack.

He tied the horses in one corner of the hut with shortened rope and spread his blankets between it and the door. Then, with the marshal's revolver in his hand, he lay down and slept.

The afternoon was far gone when he woke, and the rain was still falling. He studied the bare yard carefully, and reconnoitered the house before re-entering it.

The woman had swept and tidied the room; had put on a fresh dress, which much washing had toned down to a soft pink; had brushed and fluffed her hair. She looked up at his entrance from the sewing that occupied her; and her face, still young in spite of the harshness that work had laid upon it, was less sallow than before, and her eyes were brighter.

"Where's the kid?" the man snapped.

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

"Up on the hill. I sent him up to watch the coulee."

His eyes narrowed and he left the building. Studying the hill through the rain, he discerned the outline of the boy, lying face down under a stunted red cedar, looking toward the east.

The man returned indoors.

"How's the shoulder?" she asked.

He raised an experimental arm.

"Better. Pack me some grub. I'm moving on."

"You're a fool," she said without spirit as she went into the kitchen. "You'd do better to stay here until your shoulder's fit to travel."

"Too close to Jingo."

"Ain't nobody going to fight all that mud to come after you. A horse couldn't get through, let alone a car. And you don't think they'd foot it after you even if they knew where to find you; do you? And this rain ain't going to do your shoulder no good."

She bent to pick up a sack from the floor. Under the thin pink dress the line of back and hips and legs stood out sharply against the wooden wall.

As she straightened she met his gaze, her lids dropped, her face flushed, her lips parted a little.

The man leaned against the jamb of the door and caressed the muddy stubble of his chin with a thick thumb.

"Maybe you're right," he said.

She put away the food she had been bundling, took a galvanized pail from the corner, and made three trips to the spring, filling an iron tub that she had set on the stove.

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He stood in the doorway watching.

She stirred the fire, went into the living-room, and took a suit of underwear, a blue shirt, and a pair of socks from the bureau, a pair of gray trousers from one of the hooks, and a pair of carpet slippers from the pile of footwear. She put the clothing on a chair in the kitchen.

Then she returned to the living-room, closing the connecting door behind her.

As the man undressed and bathed he heard her humming softly. Twice he tiptoed to the connecting door and put an eye to the crack between it and the jamb. Each time he saw her sitting on the cot, bending over her sewing, her face still flushed.

He had one leg in the trousers she had given him when the humming stopped suddenly.

His right hand swept up the revolver from a convenient chair, and he moved to the door, the trousers trailing across the floor behind the ankle he had thrust through them. Flattening himself against the wall, he put an eye to the crack.

In the front door of the shack stood a tall youth in a slicker that was glistening with water. In the youth's hands was a double-barreled shotgun, the twin muzzles of which, like dull, malignant eyes, were focused on the center of the connecting door.

The man in the kitchen swung his revolver up, his thumb drawing back the hammer with the mechanical precision of the man who is accustomed to single-action pistols.

The lean-to's rear door slammed open.

"Drop it!"

The fugitive, wheeling with the sound of the door's opening, was facing this new enemy before the order was out.

Two guns roared together.

But the fugitive's feet, as he wheeled, had become entangled in the trailing trousers. The trousers had tripped him. He had gone to his knees at the very instant of the two guns' roaring.

His bullet had gone out into space over the shoulder of the man in the doorway. That one's bullet had driven through the wall a scant inch over the falling fugitive's head.

Floundering on his knees, the fugitive fired again.

The man in the door swayed and spun half around from the shock of the bullet.

As he righted himself the fugitive's forefinger tightened again around the trigger —

From the connecting doorway a shotgun thundered.

The fugitive came straight up on his feet, his face filled with surprise, stood bolt upright for a moment, and wilted to the floor.

The youth with the shotgun crossed to the man who leaned against the door with a hand clapped to his side.

"Did he get you, Dick?"

"Just through the flesh, I reckon — don't amount to nothing. Reckon you killed him, Bob?"

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"I reckon I did. I hit him fair!"

The woman was in the lean-to.

"Where's Buddy?"

"The kid's all right, Mrs. Odams," Bob assured her. "But he was all in from running through the mud, so Ma put him to bed."

The man who lay still on the floor made a sound then, and they saw that his eyes were open.

Mrs. Odams and Bob knelt beside him, but he stopped them when they tried to move him to examine the wreckage the shotgun had made of his back.

"No use," he protested, blood trickling thinly from the corners of his mouth as he spoke. "Let me alone."

Then his eyes — their red savageness glazed — sought the woman's.

"You — Dan — Odam's — woman?" he managed, the words blurred by a gurgle deep in his throat.

There was something of defiance — a hint that she felt the need of justification — in her answer. "Yes."

His face — thick-featured and deep-lined without the mud — told nothing of what was going on in his mind.

"Dummy," he murmured to himself presently, his eyes flickering toward the hill on whose top he had seen what he had believed to be a reclining boy.

She nodded.

The man who had killed Dan Odams turned his head away and spat his mouth empty of blood. Then his eyes returned to hers.

"Good girl," he said clearly — and died.

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Remember how H. L. Mencken "translated" the Declaration of Independence from English into American? The noble words beginning "When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them . . ." became in Mencken's Americanese "When things get so balled up that the people of a country got to cut loose from some other country and go it on their own hook . . ."

The immortal words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ." became in Mencken's pungent colloquialisms "All we got to say on this proposition is this: first, me and you is as good as anybody else . . ."

Great concepts of detective-story technique have also suffered a comparable sea-change into something rich and strange . . . In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "Now, brought to this conclusion in so unequivocal a manner as we are, it is not our part, as reasoners, to reject it on account of apparent impossibilities. It is only left for us to prove that these apparent 'impossibilities' are, in reality, not such."

There, in essence, is one of the two great precepts upon which, as Howard Haycraft has said, "all fictional detection worth the name has been based." But it took a later master — and we must give credit where credit is Doyle — to rephrase the axiom into the sharply brilliant statement by which it is now best known. In THE SIGN OF FOUR *(1890), nearly a half-century after Poe conceived the principle, Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes say for the first time: "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains,* however improbable, *must be the truth." And there is an inevitability in this phrasing, a perfection of expression, which will never die.*

The detectival dictum of the elimination-of-the-impossible has been, again in Howard Haycraft's words, "relied on and often re-stated by all the better sleuths." But did you know that Scattergood Baines has also re-stated the original Poe-Doyle aphorism?

Here is the great concept in Vermont vernacular: "When you're a-studyin' a set of facts," opines Clarence Budington Kelland's rustic raveler, "and only two things kin possibly be true, and ye know one of 'em hain't true, then the other one must be — even if it hain't possible."

Scattergood's manhunting methods are also in the great Poe-tic tradition. "I jest kind of go here and there, and ask this and that — jest noticin', that's all, and bein' willin' to recognize that if things hain't one way, they got to be t'other . . ."

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A PIECE OF STRING

by CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

SCATTERGOOD BAINES had never taken up automobiles. Though he could have owned a garageful had he desired, he was not the possessor even of a flivver. It was not that he disapproved of them or hesitated to use one in an emergency, but for reasons sufficient for himself.

"My habits of mind," he said once, "works accordin' to the speed of hosses. Fur forty, fifty year I contrived my errands so's they could be run in a buggy. Now, if I was to change I'd be gittin' everywheres too soon. And there I'd be with nothin' to do, jest a-waitin' around and mebby gittin' into trouble. I calc'late I'll cling to the ol' mare."

So instead of speeding up the valley road in a motor the old hardware merchant, lumberman, politician, banker, and whatnot was driving toward Coldriver in a dusty buggy whose top had been many times varnished, and which smelled of leather and horsehair and oats as only an ancient buggy can smell.

As he rounded the curve where the river escapes from the mill pond, he saw ahead of him in the dust the flutter of a skirt. It was a small skirt, because it was covering a small person who wore a perky little hat over one ear, with a feather in it that reminded Scattergood of an actress he had seen years and years ago as Rosalind. He leaned forward to stare over his mare's shoulder, and noted with approval the tiny feet taking sturdy, determined steps, and the erect shoulders and flat back, and the free, lissom, youthful swing of the hips.

Without looking back, the girl edged over toward the ditch to permit him to pass, but he drew rein and leaned an elbow on an ample leg.

"Goin' some'eres?" he asked. "Or jest exercisin'?"

"I'm going to Coldriver," she said.

"It's quite a piece yit," he observed. "Ye kin squeeze in here if ye've a mind to. Um. . . . Visitin' around here?"

He cramped the wheels, and she climbed in beside him after a swift, shrewd glance of appraisal.

"Do you know a man named Scattergood Baines?" she countered.

"Calc'late to," he replied.

"What sort of man is he?" she asked.

"Some says one thing and some says another," said Scattergood. "Depends on which side of the deal ye be. Kind of a meddlesome ol' coot, folks claim. If he's a-doin' ye a favor, you cast your vote fur him; if he's a-doin' a favor fur the other side, ye call him

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hard names. Nobuddy's so bad he's pizen to everybuddy, and nobuddy's so good there hain't folks to claim he'd steal aigs from under a settin' hen."

"I'm going to see him," she said.

"Business or pleasure?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have hitch-hiked all the way from New York just to get his autograph," she said tartly.

"Dew tell! All the way from New York. Um. . . . Hain't the trains still runnin'?"

"And they're still charging money to ride on them," the girl said. "And one of the things they know enough to do is watch depots." At this she bit her lip and looked at him apprehensively.

He did not appear to have noticed this somewhat sensational slip. "Hain't ye got no baggage?"

She shook a little bag that Scattergood would have described as a reticule. "Toothbrush, lipstick, compact, clean handkerchief," she said.

"Kind of a self-reliant gal, hain't ye?"

She looked up at him rather in surprise. "Why, I guess I must be. I never noticed it before."

"Beats all what qualities necessity fetches out in folks," he observed. "Wa-al, I shouldn't be a mite s'prised if Scattergood was glad to see ye."

"My father said he would be," observed the young woman. "How far is Coldriver?"

"Ye kin see it when we round the next bend."

She hesitated, but eager anxiety urged her to ask the next question: "You haven't seen a boy — a young man — along the road? One that looks like me?"

"How much like you?" asked Scattergood.

"Heaps. We're twins."

"Hain't seen him. . . . Now ye git a view of Coldriver. Sightly place, hain't it? How'd ye come to lose your brother?"

"He had to come away faster," she said.

"Um. . . . And was he comin' to see Scattergood Baines?"

"Possibly, but I think he had another reason."

"Wa-al, wa-al, and so your pa told ye to come see Scattergood."

"That was before he died," said the girl.

"Dew tell!" Scattergood was searching his memory, but there was no clue sufficient to prompt him. The mare jogged into town and across the bridge and up the hill. "I'll drive ye to Scattergood's house. Calc'late he'll be there by the time we git to it."

"You're very kind," she said.

Presently Scattergood drove through his own gate and stopped beside the side stoop.

"Hey, Mandy!" he called. "Mandy! Come out here! Ye got comp'ny, seems as though."

The round figure of Scattergood's wife appeared in the door. She blinked in the bright sunlight and wiped her hands on her apron.

"What ye mean a-callin' me away from my oven jest when the pies has

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gone in? Think I got nothin' to do but come a-runnin' every time 'ye holler?"

"Mandy," Scattergood said mildly, "ye'll be givin' comp'ny a wrong idee."

"If I give 'em any idee what a nuisance ye be, Scattergood Baines —"

Scattergood felt the young body beside him start, and he smiled down at her.

"Times when a body learns more by keepin' his mouth shet. Mandy, here's a gal's walked all the way from New York to see me. Ye better watch out when they come's fur as that. Ye kin see my reppitation's stretchin' out."

Mandy came out now and stood on the stoop, and regarded Scattergood and his passenger with hostile eye.

"What's her name, and what's she want, and why don't ye fetch her in?" she demanded.

"I clean forgot to ask what she's called, and she hain't stated her business, and ye hain't give me no chancet to fetch nobuddy in."

"Maybe," said the girl, "I'd better not go in."

Mandy appeared very formidable and forbidding.

"Hush up," said Mandy, "and git in out of the sun away from that palaverin' ol' man. Goodness me! I warrant ye kin do with a glass of milk and a slice of apple pie. Don't stand there a-gawkin'."

The girl eyed Mandy and then smiled. "I don't know," she said, "but what maybe you're a darling."

Mandy's eyes twinkled and she jerked her head toward the door.

"But don't you want to know my name?" asked the girl.

"I calc'late you'll tell when you git ready," said Mandy.

"It is Jennifer Asbury."

"I swan to man," said Scattergood. "Not old man Asbury's daughter?"

She nodded. "And he told me if I ever got in trouble so terrible there wasn't any way out I should come and tell you," she said.

"Eat fust," said Mandy peremptorily.

She was hungry, and Scattergood sat silent as she ate ravenously. When her appetite was satisfied she turned suddenly to the old hardware merchant.

"It's murder," she said.

"Do they think you done it?"

"They think my brother Ransom did it," said Jennifer.

"Did he?" asked Scattergood.

"No."

"How d'ye know that?"

"He told me," she said simply. "It was Grandfather who was killed in his big house. It was with a bronze warrior that belonged to Ransom, and the way it was done nobody could do it but Ranse."

"Why not?" asked Scattergood.

"Because," she explained, "Grandfather was sick, and he was always sort of funny, and he wouldn't have a window open in his room at night, because night air was poison. So all his windows were shut and locked. And he locked his bedroom door, and it

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stayed locked. But on account of being sick he left unlocked the door between Ranse's bedroom and his, and that is the only way the murderer could get in. And Ranse was there all the time, sitting up reading, because he was listening for Grandfather to call. And nobody went through his room. And nobody could get into Grandfather's room any other way. So it couldn't have been anybody but Ranse. And it was one of the servants who discovered it when he brought up Grandpa's breakfast in the morning and couldn't get in, so he had to come through Ranse's room. And that's how it was. And I was terribly frightened, and so was Ranse, because we saw how the police would look at it. So before the police could get there we talked, and he decided to run away —"

"Yeah. Where to?"

"I think," she said, "he planned to come here."

"To see me?" asked Scattergood.

"No," answered Jennifer. "Because Mr. Buckham lives here, and Ranse wanted to be around where Mr. Buckham was, because if Ranse didn't do it, then somebody else did, and it was somebody pretty smart, and Mr. Buckham is very, very smart."

"To be sure. I know Jim Buckham. Knowed him fur years. Um. . . . Was your grandpa's door locked on the inside?"

"And the key was in the lock," said Jennifer.

"Your brother never went to sleep? Didn't even doze off'n' have a cat nap?"

"He says not."

"And the winders was all locked inside?"

"Every one."

"Most gen'ally," said Scattergood, "it's been my observation that when a body kills another feller he's got some kind of a reason fur doin' it. Ye don't jest up and commit a murder fur the excitement of it."

"Grandpa and a Mr. Stang and Ranse were trustees under Father's will. It was all legal and I don't understand it. Ranse was made one so he would learn about the estate. Well, Mr. Stang died, and the will said just the other two should keep on being trustees, so if Grandfather died Ranse would be the only one. Ranse and I weren't to get the estate until we are twenty-five."

"Which is when?" asked Scattergood.

"In four years," said Jennifer.

"I kind of guess maybe your grandpa cramped Ranse some, eh? Ranse he calc'lated on doin' a mite of highflyin', and your grandpa stood in the way of it."

"He kept both of us on a small allowance," said Jennifer. "That's how it came I had to hitch-hike up here, because I didn't have but a few dollars, and gave them to Ranse."

"Wa-al, we got motive and we got opportunity," said Scattergood, "and we got a locked room that nobuddy could git into but your brother. It hain't an encouragin' outlook."

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"But Ranse didn't do it," she protested.

"We'll start out by makin' b'lieve he didn't, anyhow. And so your brother run off and you got the idea he come traipsin' up here on account of Buckham?"

"I'm sure he did."

"A body's got to start some place," Scattergood said. "This here's Thursday. When was the murderin' done?"

"Tuesday night," said Jennifer.

"You stay put," said Scattergood. "Mebbe ye better lock yourself into a room where Mandy can't git at ye. She'll talk ye deef. We used to have a brass monkey in the parlor, and Mandy she talked to it so constant its ears got wore down. G'-by."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Baines?"

"I'll jest kind of go here and there, and ask this and that," he said. "G'-by."

Once more he got into the old buggy and drove down to the village. Already the train had whistled, and shortly after he arrived at his hardware store and turned his mare over to the liveryman, Pliny Pickett, formerly driver of the stage that plied the Valley road, but now, in his old age, proud conductor of the railroad Scattergood had built down to the junction point, came creaking up to the piazza where Scattergood sat in his specially reinforced chair.

"Afternoon, Scattergood," he said.

"How be ye, Pliny? Eh? Keepin' well?"

"Middlin'," said Pliny. "Fetched up three drummers and six passengers, and Mis' Moon was took sick on the curves —"

"Allus is," said Scattergood. "Um. . . . Buckham wa'n't on the train?"

"No."

"On it yestiddy?"

"Hain't been onto it this here livelong summer. It's them automobiles," Pliny said bitterly.

"Hain't that there Buckham's chauffeur standin' by the pust office?"

"Calc'late so."

"Know him?" said Scattergood.

"Name of Perkins," said Pliny.

"Would ye, maybe, git talkin' to this here Perkins and inquire if he's drove to New York and back this week?"

"Seems as though I'd like to know that," said Pliny.

"Or if his boss was away from home, say, Tuesday night?"

"Mebbe I'd git around to that."

"G'-by," said Scattergood.

"G'-by," responded Pliny.

Scattergood discovered as a result of this investigation that Buckham had not been driven to New York, and that, so far as Perkins knew, his employer had been in Coldriver on Tuesday and Wednesday. He, himself, had driven to Boston to deliver some documents, so could not state of his own knowledge.

Scattergood basked in the sun with closed eyes. Presently Coldriver became aware that he wrestled with a problem, because his hand stole down

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and loosened his shoe. Presently it was off, and the old man's bare toes wriggled energetically in the balmy air. They wriggled for half an hour, while Scattergood reviewed his knowledge of the late Mr. Asbury and his family, and of Buckham. Buckham was a lawyer. For years he had been retained by the elder Asbury, whose murder presented the puzzle under solution. There was the connection. But why did young Ranse Asbury suspect him? Where could Buckham's motive lie? And if Buckham were in Coldriver on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, how could he have been in New York to commit the crime?

It was a six-hour drive to the city. Buckham had not left by train. He had not been driven by his chauffeur. To Scattergood it appeared he had a perfect alibi. But to the old hardware merchant nothing was so that only appeared to be so.

He continued to sit on his piazza. Presently a station wagon rounded the corner, and a comfortably stout woman of mature age alighted at the grocery store. Scattergood waited for her to emerge and then called, "How be ye, Mis' Sloat?"

"How be ye, Scattergood?"

"Nothin' in my line today? Kitchenware or somethin' like that?"

She hesitated and then ambled across the road. "Glad ye spoke," she said, panting, "I nigh forgot to git me an ice pick. Mine jest disappeared straight off'm the earth. I never see the beat of how things go, and ye never git to see 'em ag'in."

Scattergood supplied the demand with deliberation, and so prolonged the conversation.

"Cookin' fur Mr. Buckham yit, hain't ye?" he asked. "I don't see how a body'd come to lose an ice pick."

"Me neither. It was there Tuesday when I fixed his drink fur him, and when I got back Wednesday and went to look fur it, there wa'n't hide nor hair of it."

"Ye wa'n't to home Tuesday night?"

"Nellie's second was a-comin'. So he says to go along and leave some potater salad in the ice box and he'd make out. Kind of unhandy on account of Mary Bogert wantin' to go to that dance down to the Bridge. But he says we might's well make a job of it, and we done so."

"Leavin' Buckham alone in the house with his potater salad," said Scattergood.

"My son he come and drove both of us to taown around four o'clock, and we both got home next day jest 'fore noon."

"Um. Buckham there when ye got back? Find him all safe 'n' sound?"

"A-settin' on the front stoop in his bathrobe," said the cook tartly.

"G'-by, Mis' Sloat."

"G'-by, Scattergood."

Here was something for Scattergood to mull over. Buckham had slept alone in his house on Tuesday night. The chauffeur had been in Boston; Mrs. Sloat and the girl had been absent. But Buckham had been there at four o'clock, and he had been there before noon the next day.

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Scattergood wondered if anybody had seen the man between those hours. If Buckham had been in Coldriver at a late hour Tuesday night, then he was eliminated as a suspect. Of course, there was no reason apparent to Scattergood why he should be a suspect anyhow — except some expressed suspicion on the part of the boy who stood accused of the murder. But that boy must have had some reason — and it was a starting point.

"Ye can't never git no'eres," Scattergood was accustomed to say, "if ye don't pick out some direction to go in. It's better to move hit or miss than jest to set."

So he had his mare hitched again and drove out toward the Handle, where summer folk resided, and stopped at Ovid Peters's farm, which lay cater-cornered from Buckham's small but comfortable house where he lived his rather unsociable bachelor's existence. Mrs. Peters was rocking on the front stoop with a pan of peas on her lap, and she nodded as Scattergood walked up the path.

"Jest happened to see ye there," said the old man, "and stopped to pass the time of day."

"Set. Can't I git ye a glass of milk or suthin'?"

"Thank ye, but it hain't long since I et," he answered. "Git a clear view of Buckham's house from here, don't ye?"

"Not," said Mrs. Peters, "that there's much to see."

"Set on the stoop evenin's, I calc'late. Sightly spot."

"Nice nights Ovid and me set here till we go to bed."

"Don't blame ye. So Buckham don't do much neighborin'."

"Keeps to himself," said Mrs. Peters.

"Don't see him much myself," said Scattergood. "Lemme see — last time I set eyes on him was on Tuesday night. Daown to the movie show around half-past nine."

"Tuesday. Don't see how ye could. All his help was gone that night, so the' wa'n't nobuddy but him to home. And his light was a-goin' in his bedroom till nigh ten o'clock. Ovid 'n' me seen it turn out just afore we went to bed, and remarked he was goin' to sleep earlier 'n usual."

"You saw him turn out his light around ten?"

"We done *so*," said Mrs. Peters firmly.

Scattergood looked across at the house.

"Which winder's hisn?"

"South corner."

"Did the light jest go out, or did ye notice him git up and turn it out?"

"Kind of cur'ous, hain't ye? Jest see it *go* out. Shade was drawed daown."

"G'-by," said Scattergood abruptly.

Mrs. Peters followed him with keen eyes. "Now, what in tunket is he a-prowlin' after?" she asked herself.

As Scattergood walked toward his buggy he saw Buckham's tall form walk across the road with fly rod and basket, on his way to the brook. Scattergood hesitated and, after puttering

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around the mare for a few moments, strolled through Buckham's gate and back to the garage. Perkins was washing the big car. The station wagon stood outside, and a small maroon coupé occupied a space over at the left.

"Buckham hain't home?" asked Scattergood.

"You just missed him."

"Um. . . . Don't use this here leetle car much?"

"Very seldom. Occasionally the boss drives it."

Scattergood looked about him, noticing details, without any set purpose. Under the bench his eye caught sight of a small wooden handle and he bent to pick it up. It was the handle of an ice pick with the steel broken off short. The cook's ice pick. It interested him. What would anyone want of an ice pick in a garage?

"Little car in good shape?" he asked.

"Tires aren't so good," said the chauffeur. "One of 'em was flat when I went away Tuesday morning." He frowned. "And the lift over the rumble seat sticks. You have to stick something in the crack and jiggle with the catch."

"Dew tell," said Scattergood, and stared at the ice pick. One could use that implement for just such a purpose. It fixed his attention on the car. "What's anybody want to git it open fur? Nobuddy ever rides in it."

"Tools are in there," said the chauffeur. "I guess somebody had to get in to change that tire."

"Oh, somebuddy changed a tire?"

"The flat was changed when I got home. Boss must have used the little bus."

That was something to look into. Who had seen Buckham out in the little car on Tuesday or Wednesday? Certainly not Tuesday night, or Mrs. Peters would have mentioned hearing the car drive out of the yard. And, if Buckham had driven it to New York, he would have had to start by six. But Buckham had been there to turn off his light at ten.

The garage stood at the edge of a dip in the land, which fell away into the woods and down which ran a lane that traversed the farm and came out on the Bridge road half a mile away. Scattergood nodded to the chauffeur and ambled down this little-used way. He stopped now and then, whistling between his teeth, and then turned back to the Buckham house. He crossed the road again, leaving the mare to stand patiently, and kept on toward the brook. He stood at the top of the eminence, looking downward, and saw, some distance away, a man's figure moving among the young spruces. Scattergood started downward. Presently he stepped off the path and proceeded with caution until the ripple of water over its bed of stones came to his ear, and there he stood very still until a figure flitted past from one clump of young trees to another. It was not Buckham.

"Ranse!" said Scattergood in a voice little above a whisper.

The boy halted, crouched, turned

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a startled face toward the old man, who motioned him to approach. Young Asbury walked toward him guardedly and halted.

"Name of Baines — Scattergood Baines. Your pa 'n' me was friends," said Scattergood. "Your sister's to my house this very minnit. What ye calc'late to do here a-lurkin' in the spruces?"

"I'm going," said the boy, "to twist his neck till he tells the truth."

"Um. . . . Dunno's that's the best way — even if he's got some truth to tell. If ye could solve all the problems of this here life by hittin' somebuddy on the jaw, it 'ud be perty simple. But ye can't contrive to do it. Let's you 'n' me talk."

"My father," said Ranse, "was always telling us about Scattergood Baines. I'll talk to you, sir. But that doesn't mean I promise to lay off Buckham."

"So fur, so good. We better skedaddle a piece out of earshot. Um. . . . Now, if ye done this here murder, nothin'll save ye. If ye didn't, what I got in mind won't do ye no harm. But ye won't like it."

"Do you think I did it, sir?"

"It looks so all-fired certain ye did," said Scattergood, "that it makes a body feel some feller took pains to make it look that way. A donkey don't git to look like a zebry unless somebuddy paints stripes onto it. Looks to me like you'd been worked on with a paint brush. Huh! What makes ye think Buckham done it?"

"To keep out of jail," said the boy. "Someone has been robbing the estate. It was either Grandfather or Buckham or myself. — Buckham's the lawyer in charge of the estate. — Grandfather knew *he* didn't do it. He called me in and told me it was Buckham or myself. Queer old gentleman, Grandfather — but pretty swell when you knew him. When he told me that, he stopped and smiled at me, and said, 'So, of course, it's Buckham.' He didn't even bother to ask me or to suspect me. He knew. He went on collecting evidence and he had the file of it in his room that night. It was gone."

"That could be made to look bad fur you, too," said Scattergood.

"Who would ever suspect anyone but me when the facts came out? A jury would believe I killed Grandfather to save my skin."

"Buckham know you was told this?"

"Grandfather cautioned me not to tell a soul."

"I calc'late I got to use you fur an angleworm to ketch trout. Kin ye manage to put your dependence on me, and kin ye manage to mebby spend a night in jail 'thout ondue misery?"

The boy regarded Scattergood with level eyes and nodded. "Whatever you say, sir," he said.

"What," said Scattergood, "would be more natural than fur you to run off like ye done and come to git the help of the lawyer your family allus trusted?"

"I see," said the boy, and frowned.

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"I'll do the talkin'," said Scattergood. "When ye git's old as I be you've had lots of practice at it. About all an old feller kin do is wag his jaw, so he gits to be good at it."

They went down to the brook, and Scattergood called Buckham's name loudly. The lawyer answered the hail, and presently they met in a little clearing. The man jerked suddenly as he saw Ransom Asbury, and then advanced with grim face.

"Got a visitor fur ye," said Scattergood. "Looks like he's in a peck of trouble, so he lit out and come a-runnin' to see the fambly lawyer. Looked to him like the' wa'n't no other place to go. So hadn't ye better leave off fishin' and come back to the house to see what kin be done?"

"I was coming to town tonight, Ransom," said Buckham. "I hope you can tell me something that will put a different face on this terrible thing."

"He needs a good lawyer to advise him," said Scattergood.

Silently they made their way to the house, and Buckham was leading the way into the living-room when Scattergood intervened. "Hain't the' no room upstairs?" he asked. "Can't tell who'll come traipsin' in here."

"We can go up to my room," said Buckham grimly.

"Good idee," said Scattergood.

They climbed the stairs and presently were seated in the bedroom, where Buckham commenced to question Ransom as if the boy were on the witness stand. Scattergood remained silent, but his eyes scrutinized the room with a meticulous care. He had wanted to see the interior of this room, for, to him, it was the key log of the jam. Ruthlessly the lawyer bored into the boy, made him repeat every damning detail of the Tuesday night of the murder, and if his sympathies were with the client thus unexpectedly come to him, it was not easy to perceive.

"My advice to this boy," he said "is to give himself up."

"Calc'lated ye would advise that," said Scattergood.

"You agree with me?"

"To be sure. But I dunno's I'd go so fur as to advise a plea of guilty. Mebbe a good lawyer kin git him off."

"It is a possibility," said Buckham.

Scattergood cleared his throat and puffed out his cheeks. "When you're a-studyin' a set of facts," he said, "and only two things kin possibly be true, and ye know one of 'em hain't true, then the other one must be." He paused. "Even if it hain't possible."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Baines."

"Some does," said Scattergood, "and some doesn't. If folks understood everythin' a body said it 'ud kind of kill off talk. It's askin' questions back 'n' forth that makes pleasant evenin's. Wa-al, sonny, ye heard Mr. Buckham's advice. Calc'late ye better foller it. We'll be a-drivin' down to see the sheriff."

They went downstairs. Ransom Asbury eyed Scattergood askance, but received no nod or smile of reassurance.

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"I'll drive the boy down in the buggy," said Scattergood. "You foller along in your car."

The boy climbed glumly into the buggy and Scattergood clucked to the mare. He grunted a couple of times and looked back over his shoulder. "It's allus easier to find suthin' if ye got an idee what kind of a object you're a-lookin' fur," he said. "Um. . . . Seems as though ye hain't pleased with how events is movin'. Shu'dn't be s'prised if ye took a likin' to Sheriff Fox. Real hospitable feller."

The boy crouched hopelessly beside Scattergood, but made no rejoinder. They drew up in front of the post office, under which was the jail, and over which the sheriff maintained his office. Buckham drew up at the sidewalk, and the three mounted the stairs. Scattergood pushed open the door at the top.

"Afternoon, Sheriff. How be ye?" he said. "Um. . . . Got a boarder fur ye. Charge of murder."

"Murderin' who?" asked Mr. Fox.

"Feller in New York by the name of Asbury. Glad to see ye got a hefty deppity handy. Hey, Pazzy, go stand in front of the door. Suthin' might happen."

"When ye git around to it," said the sheriff patiently, "ye might git down to brass tacks."

"I'm amblin' along that way, Sheriff. Don't go a-pushin' and a-shovin' me. This here's a intricate business, seems as though. Got alibis into it and skulduggery and sich-like. Now, nobuddy that's got a clean conscience goes to a heap of trouble to manufacture him an alibi."

"You're tellin' it," said the sheriff.

"Wa-al, this here murder was done in a room where the doors and winders was locked on the inside. Only way in was through this here boy's room, and he was awake all night and nobuddy come through. So, bein' as how nobuddy could git in but him, and bein' as he had a motive, it looks like ye got a murderer all fixed up."

The sheriff eyed Ransom and nodded.

"Now, ye got to face a couple of alternatives: Either this here boy killed his grandpa, or he didn't. And, if he didn't, then somebuddy must a' got into a room that was locked and then got out ag'in, leavin' it locked like he found it. Which hain't possible."

"Don't seem so," said the sheriff.

"So we'll lay down that there p'int fur a minnit," said Scattergood, "and kind of talk about alibis. Now, a feller that is in Coldriver at ten o'clock at night can't do no murder in New York about midnight."

Buckham turned suddenly and glared at Scattergood.

"No," said the old hardware merchant. "He'd have to leave fur New York along six o'clock to git there. Which he could 'a' done — but for bein' in his house four hours after that and goin' to bed and puttin' out his light. So that kind of eliminates the feller I'm talkin' about.

"Even if this feller's cook lost an ice pick, and it was found busted in

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the garage where the feller used it to pry open the back seat of a car to git at the tools to change a tire. That wouldn't make no difference at all."

"It wouldn't make none," said the sheriff.

"Or if he pushed the car out of the garage by hand and got in and let her coast down the lane so as nobuddy could hear his engine start nor see him a-goin'. And even if the lane runs into the Bridge road."

"Don't see what that's got to do with it. Not so long's the feller was to home at ten o'clock," said the sheriff.

"Neighbors seen his light on all the evenin'," said Scattergood, "and seen it go off at ten. And lights don't go off like that 'thout somebuddy turnin' 'em."

"They don't," said the sheriff.

"But," said Scattergood, "the feller that was erectin' this here alibi we're discussing plumb forgot a piece of string."

"Eh?"

"About so long," said Scattergood, measuring on his finger. "It was a-danglin' to the wall bracket that holds the electric light. He clean forgot it. Wa-al, there had to be a string or suthin', or else this here alibi was as good as gold. But the string's there, Sheriff, and it's charred on the end, like it got burned through. Which is how the light come to git itself turned out at ten."

"Don't jest foller ye, Scattergood."

"Buckham follers," Scattergood said. "He tied him a weight to the chain that pulls off the light, and then he looped it to the bracket so's it wouldn't drop. And he rigs him a candle so as it'll burn about four hours before it gits to this-here string and burns it through. And then the weight up and drops and off goes the light nice as anythin'."

"You're a maniac," said Buckham savagely.

"Mebby so. But, fur all that, Sheriff, I turn this here feller over to ye charged with the murder of Ol' Man Asbury, and ye better notify the New York police."

"Kind of slender evidence," said the sheriff.

"You hang onto him jest the same, and then you send a telegraph to the New York police. What's the name of the servant that fetched up your grandpa's breakfast and found him dead?" he asked of Ransom.

"Jadkin — William Jadkin."

"Yeah. Wa-al, Sheriff, you telegraph New York to go 'n' arrest this here William Jadkin as an accessory, on account of him lettin' Buckham into the house, but mostly on account of him takin' in that breakfast and lockin' the old man's door on the inside so as it would show that way when the police come."

"Ye mean the door was unlocked, and this feller locked it on the inside when he went in there? How d'ye know?"

"If," said Scattergood, "the's only one thing that's possible, why, that thing has got to be it. Nobuddy kin git into a locked room 'thout leavin'

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marks. But somebuddy did git in. And the door was found locked after he went out. Nobuddy went into that room but this here Jadkin. So, follerin' and in consequence of that there reasonin', Jadkin done it and is an accessory."

"Baines," said Buckham, "you're crazy. I'll make you suffer for this."

"You'll set in one of the sheriff's cells till we git to hear from New York," said Scattergood. "I'll leave him to you, Sheriff. This here boy needs some of Mandy's cookin' to bolster him up."

It was characteristic of the old man that he did not linger after his job was done. He drove Ransom out to his house, and once more Mandy's pantry and ice box yielded up their treasures to a boy who, even yet, could not realize what had happened nor how it had come to pass.

"But, Mr. Baines," he said, "there isn't any *proof*."

"If Mr. Baines says there is," said his sister, "then there is."

It was perhaps three hours later that Sheriff Fox called on the telephone.

"Message from New York," he said. "This feller Jadkin is a crook, with his picture in the gallery. Buckham had a holt over him. He busted down and confessed the whole business, lock, stock, and barrel — and a couple of detectives is leavin' New York to come up after Buckham. I'm arrangin' fur extradition now."

"There ye be," said Scattergood. "Um. . . . All comes of an ice pick and a hunk of string no longer'n your finger."

"I think," said Jennifer Asbury, "I think it was the most wonderful thing anybody ever did, and I'll never forget it."

"'Twa'n't," said Scattergood. "Jest noticin' — that's all. And bein' willin' to recognize that if things hain't one way, they got to be t'other. Folks gits overwhelmed by what their eyes and their ears tell 'em. What ye see and hear hain't no good to speak of till ye work it through the filter, and that's what your brains is fur."

"All the same, it was wonderful," said Jennifer.

"So's filters," said Scattergood, "if folks uses 'em. Ye can't keep microbes out of your drinkin' water if ye keep the filter in a box of nails in the barn. Ye got to hitch it to the faucet and let the water run through."

"I still think it was wonderful," said Jennifer.

"Have it your own way," said Scattergood. "I don't never expect to git so aged that a mite of flatterin' won't set perty sweet onto my stummick."

"You won't git none from me, Scattergood Baines," said Mandy tartly.

"So long," said Scattergood, "as your cookin' holds up its quality I kin git along 'thout your praise. I druther have my stummick fed than my vanity."

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Here is another short-short story by Ferenc Molnár, the world renowned Hungarian dramatist who wrote the unforgettably enchanting "Liliom" and the wise and witty "The Guardsman" — most of us remember the former as the basis of "Carousel," and the latter as the famous vehicle for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne . . .

Superior riddle stories are as scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth. We wish there were enough of them to give you one every month — but that is like expecting every story, even from the very best authors, to be a masterpiece. We are happy to bring you an occasional puzzle or problem tale of memorable quality.

We think you will find Molnár's riddle of "The Most Dangerous Woman in the World" — well, what adjectives have we already used to describe Molnár's work? Enchanting — yes, it is that; wise and witty — "The Most Dangerous Woman" is all of that.

Reader, enjoy yourself — and just before Molnár reveals the answer, we will stop the story and give you a chance to solve the conundrum for yourself . . .

THE MOST DANGEROUS WOMAN IN THE WORLD

by FERENC MOLNÁR

SCENE: The club of some of the country's wealthiest men. The members are so rich that they are bored by their money. They are owners of gigantic industrial plants, banks, shipping concerns, estates, and ancestral fortunes. Their wealth is so vast that they are never perturbed by irritating telegrams from their business agents or stock brokers. Their money is so wisely invested that neither war nor economic crisis, strike nor political upheaval, can have the slightest effect on it.

One of them remarks:

"I have nothing to fear. The way my money is invested reminds me of a centipede. Let twenty of its feet be cut away, there are still eighty left on which it balances and moves with perfect ease."

The others nod. Their approval means more than mere acquiescence in the efficacy of his method. It means particularly that they have protected their fortunes in exactly the same way.

Another adds:

"But there is nothing like a woman to ruin great fortunes — even those which cannot possibly be destroyed by anything else."

All nod. This again indicates not simply recognition of the speaker's

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wisdom — but specifically that woman is the one danger still at large in the world threatening the wealth of a man.

"Suppose," says one of the party, "that we try to determine the type which may safely be called the most dangerous woman for a man, *financially*."

A voice:

"How shall we proceed?"

"Very simply. Those of us who have found ourselves involved with amazingly extravagant women will adjourn to the next room. Myself, for one. We will exchange experiences and award a prize to the man who convinces us that the woman he describes represents the greatest danger to the fortune of any man who loves her."

General excitement. Six gentlemen retire into the next room. On the table, in the center of the room, is placed the prize: a box of very fine cigars.

The debate begins.

Here are set down the minutes of the session:

The first man said: "The woman I knew could never tell me, at night, what had become of the money I had given her in the morning. She bought trifles and promptly lost them. She pressed loans on her friends. She gave extravagant tips. She brought home stray waifs to dinner. She donated great sums to charities, and could never pass a beggar on the street. Banknotes fluttered to her feet every time she pulled a handkerchief or a powder puff out of her bag. The bills she lost in the streets would have constituted a handsome income for any poor family. She could never remember spending much money on any single thing, and yet night after night she came home penniless. At the end of a year I discovered that she had actually imperiled my financial situation."

An elderly, bald-headed man, seated by himself in a corner of the room, spoke up:

"That's nothing. Many men are rich enough to stand that and much more."

The second speaker began: "The woman I loved adored beautiful gowns, wraps, hats, furs, shoes, lingerie. All the expensive *ateliers* of Paris worked for her. I had to employ a secretarial force to handle the correspondence relating to her clothes. I had a special treasurer to pay her bills. She spent so much money that I got a serious attack of neuralgia and was forced to retire to a sanitarium for a while."

The little bald-headed man spoke up again:

"That wasn't particularly serious, because it had its limits. Three gowns a day — 1095 gowns a year; three pairs of stockings a day — 1095 pairs of stockings a year, and so on. There is a limit beyond which no woman can possibly go. We figure out the limit and arrange our budget accordingly. A really cautious man need not be

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afraid of a woman's passion for clothes."

"All the great diamonds and beautiful emeralds . . ." began the third man.

But the little bald-headed man interrupted him immediately with a wave of the hand.

"One can put up with even such a woman, although I admit that she is more dangerous than the first two. But there is a limit in this case, also. The limit: the human body. A woman — no matter how much she loves tiaras — has only one head. As for earrings — thank God she has but two ears. She has only two arms for bracelets, and only ten fingers for rings. And these ten fingers are not so long that a really rich man should fret about covering them from knuckle to nail, if necessary. The length of the throat limits the number of necklaces. In view of the inexplicable fact that our women have not as yet adopted the African custom of suspending jewelry from their noses and their lips, the possibility of spending money seems to me definitely limited. I won't deny that such a woman represents a financial danger, but as soon as you have covered her with jewelry from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, she is sated, and you have a chance to recuperate, to begin again."

"My wife," began the fourth man, "was a passionate gambler."

"That's enough!" the little bald-headed man interrupted again. "Don't go on! The danger of a gambling woman is minimized by the incontrovertible fact that no gambler can escape winning once in a while, no matter how unlucky she is. She cannot be called the most dangerous woman at all!"

"The woman I loved," the fifth said, "came of a poor, but prolific, family. She adored her relatives and wanted to make every one of them happy and rich — at my expense, of course."

The bald-headed man interrupted him too.

"How many relatives did she have?"

"Sixty-six."

"There!" he cried angrily. "Limited again. And when all the sixty-six relatives were happy and rich and contented, your torments were over. That was what happened, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose you are right. When each uncle and aunt had a beautifully furnished mansion and an assured income, my wife embraced me gratefully, and I started out with redoubled energy to make more and more money."

The little bald-headed man laughed aloud:

"And you dare call her the most dangerous woman!" he said intolerantly.

The five contestants who had spoken turned somewhat peevishly

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towards the little bald-headed man now:

"Now that you've rejected all our candidates for the prize, and sneered at us, suppose you tell us the most dangerous type of woman in the world."

The little old man left his corner, walked calmly up to the table and placed his hand on the top of the box of cigars.

"Have a cigar, gentlemen! I win! How? Look at my bald head. My hair fell out on account of a woman. You know my life. I was one of the richest men in this country, and ten years ago I lost every cent I had. Why? Because of a woman. Allow me to introduce to you, gentlemen, the most dangerous woman of all. I know her. She ruined me."

"What was her passion?" the others asked, eagerly sitting foward in their chairs.

EDITORS' NOTE: *Let us now repeat the brilliant and charming conundrum posed by Ferenc Molnár: What type of woman is the most dangerous for a man, financially? Five types have already been suggested — the woman who is fanatically extravagant, with a supreme contempt for the value of money; the woman with an uncontrollable passion for clothes; the woman with an equally uncontrollable mania for jewels; the woman who is an inveterate and reckless gambler; and the woman who devotes her life and her husband's fortune to making her multitudinous relatives independently wealthy. Dangerous women, indeed! — yet the elderly, bald-headed man has rejected all five candidates. None of these five, he insists, is the most dangerous woman, financially.*

What is your solution to the riddle? What type of woman do you think wins the dubious honor of being acclaimed the most dangerous woman in the world? As the losers in this delightful little competition have already asked: What was her passion?

You will find Ferenc Molnár's answer on the next page.

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Answer to

The Most Dangerous Woman in the World

"What was her passion?" the others asked.

"*Thrift!*" answered the little bald-headed man while tears stood in his eyes. "Gentlemen, the most dangerous woman on earth is the thrifty one. The woman who puts all her money in the bank. The woman who deposits the money I give her for a new hat. The woman who goes without food in order to save money. The woman who hurries to the bank early every morning to deposit what she has stored away during the previous day."

He went on, weeping: "Gentlemen, the woman who does not know what she has done with your money is endurable. The woman who adores gowns is satisfied with a thousand gowns. The woman who admires jewelry may be covered with diamonds. The woman who gambles may win occasionally. The woman who helps her family may be satisfied. But, gentlemen, is there any limit to the capacity of a bank? When does a bank urge its clients to stop saving? What is the limit of a bank account? When a thrifty woman goes into a bank she stands face to face with the infinite. You may drain the ocean with a spoon if you have patience enough. But what is such patience compared to the patience with which a bank accepts money? Is there a maximum? Is there a limit? Is there any end? What can one hope for? God save every man from a thrifty, a passionately thrifty, woman!"

He stopped. Silently, each plutocrat lighted a cigar. This ceremonial gesture constituted the unanimous, if silent, awarding of the prize.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Mildred Arthur's "The Queen Is Dead" is one of the eleven "first stories" which won special awards in last year's contest. "The Queen Is Dead," in its quiet, detailed, feminine way, is almost unbelievably well written for one who has never before had her work in print. The author has a brand of horror all her own, and it is built up, patiently, meticulously, almost agonizingly, out of bits and pieces of perceptive characterization, out of the minutiæ of emotion, sensitively and sharply observed.

Mildred Arthur is still in her twenties. A country girl, brought up in Bel Air, Maryland, a small farming town surrounded by lovely hills and valleys, she moved to Baltimore at the age of sixteen, studied journalism at the University of Baltimore, and subsequently — such is the curious way life has — worked in a Philadelphia hospital, while taking courses in sociology and criminology at the University of Pennsylvania at night.

She has written since her grammar-school days, and has a filing cabinet full of manuscripts to prove it. Eventually she came to New York, married Eric Arthur, a radio script-writer who has been connected with such blood-and-thundery shows as The Shadow, Mollé Mystery Theatre, and Gangbusters. She is afflicted with insomnia which, more and more, we are coming to believe is a writer's occupational disease; but Mrs. Arthur's insomnia may be the result of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur's staying up late discussing their respective brain children.

They say that "history repeats itself" — although Plutarch, Montaigne, and Thucydides take many more words to say it than the old proverb; and if history repeats itself, surely homicidal history does the same . . .

THE QUEEN IS DEAD

by MILDRED ARTHUR

At sixty-nine, Martha Colby's eyes were still large and beautiful, if somewhat astigmatic. She was, in fact, a remarkably preserved woman of considerable distinction. Her elegance told in her fine carriage, her frail lovely hands, in the snowy crest of hair she wore swept like a wave over her forehead. Years of gracious living had built up a reserve of charm that carried over into her less prosperous period — a charm which was now quite out of place at the Home.

Yet Mrs. Colby could not be otherwise. Whatever her surroundings, the delicacy of her up-bringing lingered snug as incense about her; and like most people of well-favored back-

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ground a light haughtiness attended her. But no one minded, for no one seemed to notice, least of all Alberta, who shared her room, and whom she might have hoped to impress by it. All the same Martha clung to her dignity and kept her pride always polished to a high gloss.

She sat in the plainly furnished lounge of the Home and surveyed her game of solitaire with restless eyes. Nancy was to have paid her a visit, but she had not come. It gave her quite a pang to think about it; her eyes drifted out of focus and she stared, unseeing, through a watery blur.

She could remember a time when it did not matter if there were no visitors. In her own home it had been different. So much to occupy her in those days, so much to do that she had not given a thought to the passing years. As long as there were the two of them, she and George, they did not need much else to occupy them. The preparation of their simple meals, even in those latter years when food was not so lavish any more, had been a thing of joy. A sauterne when there was fish; a deep-red chianti with meat; the soft flicker of lighted candles between them. And she could not remember a time when they did not dress for dinner. The memories were written on her mind, and now and again she went over the pages and relived them. Perhaps Nancy would be along on the next bus, she told herself, slowly turning up a card.

A queen — the unyielding countenance of a queen — stared boldly up at her. She felt an immediate revulsion: toward the immobile compressed mouth, the stupid hair-do flattened over the forehead in twin loops like curtain drapes, the anemic fist clutching a grubby posy. She turned the card upside down, but there was no upside down; the stony anemic queen repeated herself and would not be effaced. Martha felt the silent enduring horror of it, of something permanent and indestructible. Fear made a tight knot in her throat, and with a sudden fierce movement she scattered the cards. Miss Parner, the head nurse, caught the action as she walked by.

"Anything wrong, Mrs. Colby?" she inquired efficiently, in her starched efficient voice.

"Not a thing, thank you," Martha assured her. She felt spied upon, as if the nurse had caught her in an unguarded moment. "I expected my niece today," she added quickly.

"Why not join the others?" Miss Parner suggested, indicating a group of women clustered in rockers at the opposite end of the room.

"Yes, I might," said Martha, fingering the black velvet band about her throat. She watched the uniform crackle off through the dining-room doors, looked briefly at the five women who swayed mechanically in their rockers, then turned abruptly and left the lounge.

The room she shared seemed frightfully crowded. She could never enter it without the feeling of having been

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dispossessed, with all her belongings thrown helter-skelter about her, like furniture heaped on a sidewalk. Inside the door she stood wedged between a washstand, a bed, and a rocker. Alberta was there, swaying in the rocker in long swift dips back and forth, back and forth. Her high-buttoned shoes touched flat against the floor, lifted up and dangled in mid-air like a child's, then touched ground again on the next tilt. Looking at her, Martha felt her sixty-nine years weigh heavily. Alberta invariably had that effect on her, a crushing, bruising sensation of little time left.

"Well, well," said Alberta, her voice dry and cawing. "Back again, well, well." She rocked vigorously, her fingers clutching bird-like at the arms of the chair.

"Must you always rock that way?" asked Martha, trying to control the impatience in her voice. "I get dizzy watching you." She edged herself between the bed and rocker, the hem of her dress barely escaping the touch of Alberta's shoes.

"Dizzy, dizzy. You're dizzy, anyway," crowed Alberta. Abruptly she stopped swaying. She stared for some moments at the palm of her hand, ran her long whitish tongue over four fingers, and patted first one loop of hair and then the other — curtain drapes falling from a center-part over her forehead.

The queen, thought Martha bitterly. The stony anemic ancient queen! A relic of the long dead past! But this relic was alive and spiteful and mean and half the time out of her head. It was wrong, wrong to keep two people like Alberta and herself together in one room. Repeatedly she had begged to be moved. The reply was always the same: no space; no funds. She was to consider herself fortunate to be in a room with only one other. Martha shuddered as she sank down on her pillow. Even through her closed lids the face would not be obscured; right side up, or upside down, it was always the same: the pin scratch of a mouth, the upper-lip creases like pencil marks drawn together, tiny animal eyes looking craftily out of brown parchment cheeks. The awful awful sight of senility.

Alberta was eighty-four, with a quick look of devilment about her like a mischievous child. She took pills for her anemia and spurted energy in phenomenal doses. Yet she looked endlessly old, as if she were built up of layers of creaking sagging flesh that had simply endured forever. Eighty-four. Martha pondered the figure. She remembered her own mother at eighty-seven, tall, alive, and aware. She had not crumbled. Till the end she had been the matriarch soundly guiding her family. Martha tried to take courage from the image.

She opened her eyes to discover the ancient face of the queen hovering over her with a terrible dentured smile.

"I got one for you, too," Alberta cawed, swinging a newly galvanized bucket. "It's pretty." She stopped

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waving it long enough to run her knobby fingers over the shiny sides. "Real pretty," she added.

Martha raised herself on her elbow. What she wanted to say her elegance forbade. The creamy well-bred consistency of her life allowed no rudeness, no leveling of pride and dignity.

"I'm tired. I want to rest. Do you mind?"

"Pretty bucket," Alberta parroted. "You can wash with me." Her eagle eyes strayed hungrily to the bare wooden floor.

"Some other time."

"Now," Alberta crowed. She reached into the bucket and lifted out a piece of brown slippery soap and waved it. "Now."

"You just washed the floor yesterday. It's clean." Martha turned her back abruptly.

"Dirty," screeched the older woman. "Dirty floor." She poked a scaly finger between Martha's shoulder blades.

"Stop that!" Martha flung herself around and glared bitterly. There was despair in her slender motionless body. Her thin creamy face with the royal arch to its brows went white. Even the black velvet band about her throat seemed to blanch with the affront to its dignity.

"Dirty," Alberta echoed herself and retreated to her side of the room where from the wash basin Martha heard water gushing into the bucket. The sound of water being sloshed over the floor came to her, and in her nostrils there lodged the rheumy odor of sopping wood. She had by now become inured to the smell, and lay on her back, inert, trying to draw succor from the past, trying to recapture the soft gentility of her girlhood home that had been so full of beautiful people and beautiful things.

She had been born into a house full of treasures. She still remembered clearly the teakwood coffee table inlaid with ivory that had stood in the drawing room and been her own particular favorite; and the little wood-carved African figures that her mother had had such a passion for, some of them quite weird. All the family had a passion for loveliness. It was only a pity that the treasures had to be sold. Her parents were unlucky that way. Well, if it came to that, so was George — or had she simply carried over to him the tradition of her family's hard luck? But what did it matter? Even when the rooms had stood virtually empty, the house, the very walls had still retained a feeling of splendor, and the people in it — of heads held high.

And to think she had come to this, Martha thought as the ugly wet smell from Alberta's bucket wafted fresh into her nostrils. A quick warm spray of water prickled her face, then another. She opened her eyes to find Alberta's toothy grin hovering like a painted mask above her. Instead of a grubby flower, the queen clutched a filthy water-soaked scrub brush. She shook it, and crowed and cackled, and her spongy bosom rippled with mirth.

Martha lay with all the strength

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suddenly gone from her, as though her life had just then flowed out of her veins. It was strange, being so still inside, but the stillness did not last. In its place came a feeling, even stranger. It spread inch by inch through her, so strong it seemed to reach outside her as well, to spread through the whole damp-smelling room, so that everything in it became remote and strangely lost. Every fibre of her body suddenly came intensely alive, and angry, and desperate for fulfillment. The thing came together, full and passionate, and focused unmercifully on Alberta. But as quickly as the feeling had come, it washed away the moment a sharp rap sounded at the door.

"Yes? Who is it?" she called.

At once Alberta was at the door, pulling it open slightly and peering out through the crack. She swung the door open wide and abruptly slammed it shut again. She clucked and cackled at her little game, working eagerly at it until Martha hurried over.

"Nancy! Ah!" she breathed, unable to prevent the sharp little cry. A great smile of welcome relaxed her face, the heavy bluish lids seemed to lift as if a weight had been taken off them. "And Ellen!" She stooped to kiss the little girl. As they moved into the room Alberta slunk behind her rocker where she took up a position of watchfulness. She had seen Nancy often, but never Ellen, and she studied the child suspiciously, her black little eagle-eyes darting about in her head like tadpoles in a muddy stream.

Ellen was a dauntless, wide-eyed child of seven wearing an immense yellow bow in her hair. In her arms she carried a large doll. While her elders talked, she exchanged calculating looks with the old woman behind the rocker, relinquishing her curiosity only when Alberta, moving sluggishly from the room, closed the door behind her.

"You've no idea how glad I am to see you," said Martha in a faint blur of a voice. The fan-like wrinkles at the corners of her eyes were pulled tense, giving her a fixed haggard look. She could not mask her agitation; she felt she must talk about it.

"It's awful, Nancy," she said in a sudden outpour. "She's impossible to live with."

"Then why don't you tell them?"

"I have. I have. They won't listen to me. What will I do, Nancy?" She touched the velvet ribbon about her throat with fingers that would not stop trembling.

Nancy reached over and laid her hand on her aunt's. "Why don't you change your mind about coming with us?" she said earnestly.

Martha's eyes brightened, the eye-wrinkles went slack. "You're very sweet, Nancy. But I know how Ralph feels about me." She smiled and went on before her niece could protest. "You've got your own family to consider. Your husband comes first. I know mine always did." They were both silent for a time, staring at the

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counterpane on the bed. When Martha looked up again Ellen was at the door, stooping to the keyhole.

"What is it, Ellen?" she called.

The child raised a finger to her lips.

All at once Martha had the feeling of someone standing outside, listening. Quickly she was at the door, throwing it open. Alberta squatted there on the threshold, smiling her square terrible smile.

"You caught me," she clucked, her sparks of eyes dancing. "It's my turn next." She fussed her way past Martha and with much ado sat down in her rocking chair. She started it going and rocked so high that Ellen, who stood squarely in front of her, fascinated, thought she would go over backwards. The child was so intent on the tilting motion of the rocker that for an instant she did not realize what had happened. But quite suddenly her doll was gone from under her arm. Alberta, swaying more violently than ever, now held the doll tightly in her arms.

"Gimme that!" demanded Ellen, while the old woman, in a hoarse cawing voice, began to hum.

"Give the child her doll," said Martha sharply.

"It's mine. It's mine." The old woman hugged the doll to her, looking about with crafty calculating eyes.

"Let her be," said Nancy. "I'll get Ellen another doll."

"No. I want that one," screamed Ellen. "Give it to me — it's mine — it's mine!"

Alberta stopped the rocker suddenly, leaned forward, and with sharp little fingers plucked the ribbon out of Ellen's hair. The doll fell to the floor with a wailing "Mama." Its shiny pink face split over the forehead and down one cheek; a second gash zigzagged across the rosebud lips, severing the frozen smile, crumbling the pert little dab of nose. Ellen bent to the floor in tears.

Martha felt as if she could not endure another moment in the room. "Let's go to the lounge, Nancy," she said fiercely. Her dainty slippered feet took quick angry steps across the floor. "Come along, Ellen." Her mouth was open; she was on the verge of speaking again when it happened. Alarm spread over her face like fire. The bar of soap skidded out from under her sole; a sound, uneven, like the brush of a cry, escaped her as she went off balance and came down heavily on the bare damp floor.

Nancy rushed over to her; Ellen, already grief-stricken over her doll, reacted to the complication of fright with a feverish hysteria; and the incomprehensible Alberta sat quietly, her mouth drooping sharply at the corners, her whole face suddenly strained in a sorrowful look, like the mask of tragedy. Then she began to sob with the quaint pathos of age.

Only Martha appeared calm. "I'm not hurt," she said icily, rising slowly to her feet. All at once she began to tremble and felt she was going to cry. She had not cried in a long long time and the thought that she might give

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way now seemed dreadful. A change was coming over her — what it was she could not exactly say — a change, like suddenly knowing she had grown old. It was a hot disturbing sensation that threatened her fine carriage, her beautifully kept hair, her lovely frail hands — everything about her that had commanded deference. She knew it was not natural to her, and she fought it with the long history of her good breeding, with her own innate sense of rightness and the need for human dignity, but it persisted. She straightened up into rigidity then, even looked absurdly calm — except for her large pale eyes which had gone paler and now held a new look — a mute hard undertone of cruelty.

"Come!" she beckoned haughtily to her niece and the child.

They walked down the corridor in silence, Martha aware of a recent hollow somewhere inside, a void that needed filling if she were ever to feel herself whole again.

"You can't go on living with her," declared Nancy at last. "Why, she might have killed you!" The horror of it seemed just then to come on her.

Yes, Martha told herself, she might have killed me. It sounded idiotic spoken that way. What were they? Children, playing at games? I win, now you win. Oh, it was too ludicrous. She said nothing, yet at the core of her heart the dark bitter worm of hate had taken hold.

Sleep was impossible that night for Martha. The room was damp from floor washings and stuffy from closed windows. Alberta, with her anemia, would not tolerate a breath of fresh air. "Keep them closed," she would caw. "I want them closed." Then like a parrot: "Closed — closed —" Martha felt as if she were suffocating. She sat up in the darkness for what seemed half the night, wondering with a vague fathomless premonition at the hard core buried in her heart, wanting with all the decency in her to reject it, but it had already congealed there and would not let her rest. Once she heard Alberta clear the fogginess from her throat, then leave off with a dry clucking.

The trees on the lawn stirred with a sudden rain-driven wind. Winter would be on them soon, bleak and icy and without solace. Even the grounds would be lost to her for a period of months; only dark aging and aged faces, and that impossible mummy to live with through all the winter, day and night, week after week, month after month, living with that terrible old woman. The sodden thought grated on her with the sharp friction of unrest. She was tired, but she could not sleep.

When the idea came it struck swiftly, like a cold clamp on her heart. She sat stunned and immobile, letting the thought seep into her, living with it as with another person, coming to know and accept it. Once a terror seized her in spite of herself, but she forced it back. In the dark silence of the room she eased herself out of bed and stood looking down at Alberta.

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Only a dark knob was visible on the pillow. Alberta slept soundly as always. She would wake only when it was time to wake in the morning.

From her bureau drawer Martha took two heavy blankets which she arranged on her own bed. Noiselessly, then, she went to the windows and raised them all the way. The cold rain-washed air fed her fugitive thoughts with promise. She settled herself snugly beneath the pile of covers. Before she fell asleep she looked over at Alberta and a sudden uneasiness stirred in her, a quick of doubt which dissolved as suddenly as it had come.

The windows and the door rattling against the wind woke her, and she opened her eyes to a gusty late fall morning, feeling snug and warm beneath the blankets. From Alberta's bed came vague hoarse mumblings. The old woman, her veined, ancient legs exposed, tossed restlessly on the mattress. Martha quickly drew on her robe and closed the windows; then she stood gazing down at Alberta.

Something had happened to the older woman during the night. Her face was a crumpled mask, yellow and withered, with a look of unspeakable age and haggardness. She looked old, old, like someone long dead, and her old face appeared like a death mask. The dark cave of her mouth showed pathetically round and small, like a child's, and a faint indecipherable babble issued from it. Martha was unable to arouse her. She dressed with deliberate calm and went in search of a nurse.

Miss Parner came at once. She took hold of the bony wrist and gazed at her watch. Suddenly Alberta was seized with a spell of shivering. The twigs of arms and legs shook under the blanket in incontrollable spasms.

"What's the matter with her?" Martha asked.

"She's got a chill. Pile blankets on her while I get a hot-water bottle."

Mechanically, Martha did as she was bid, transferring the heap of covers from her bed to the other, and inside her all the time she felt nothing, a void, as if her feelings had deserted her. The minutes passed in ominous silence until the nurse returned.

"I've sent for the doctor. You go to breakfast, Mrs. Colby. I'll stay here with her."

Grateful for the suggestion, Martha walked down the corridor to the dining room, feeling neither glee nor sorrow, thinking absolutely nothing.

When she returned to her room after breakfast, Alberta was gone, taken to the infirmary, and Martha, for the first time in many weeks, felt whole again. Her feelings were coming alive now, good perceptible ones: the furniture did not seem quite so huddled, the room had already lost some of its soggy smell.

Each day she went to the infirmary and inquired politely after Alberta's health, and on the third day Miss Parner told her Alberta was critically ill. They were waiting for a turn.

"I didn't know it was that bad,"

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Martha said in a whisper. "A chill — a cold — after all, that's not so serious." She tried to make herself believe it.

"At her age —" Miss Parner shook her head and looked grave.

Alberta died in the night. Martha wept into her handkerchief when she was told, at the same time coolly wondering at her easy flow of tears since she felt no sorrow. She wondered even more at her own callousness. It was alien to her breeding, yet she could not deny that over and over again she had wished Alberta gone. Well, she had got her wish. The room was hers entirely — for a time, at least — until someone else came to stay, and she would make the most of it.

She was thrilled at the idea of having the room to herself, having all that space to move about in. Especially when all of Alberta's things were removed. She asked to have the rocker taken out also, but Miss Parner thought it ought to stay since there wasn't another one in the room. Martha had refused one for herself the very first day of her arrival. "Save it for my old age," she had smilingly told the nurse.

Now Martha stayed a little distant from everyone, perhaps a trifle more than usual, but still she held herself back in a rather gracious and calm manner, just the faintest bit haughty. It was not a pose. She felt perfectly natural about it, as she always had. The other calculating inhuman self she did not recognize any more. It had been a passing thing brought up by sheer vexation out of unknown, unacknowledged depths. It was gone now. She fitted easily into her old composure, and things went well with her for a time.

Alberta had been gone more than a week. The wet wood smell had just about disappeared, and Martha was enjoying her solitude. She was fastening her black velvet ribbon about her throat the morning her eye caught sight of the shiny galvanized surface of the bucket. It stood in the corner beside the door, as if someone had left it there to be emptied. There was water in it too — gray, ugly water. Could it be that she had not noticed it there all that time? Not likely, unless her age was telling on her more than she cared to admit.

She set the bucket in the corridor and when she came back from breakfast it was gone. The porter had undoubtedly disposed of it. Martha would not have given it a second thought if that night she had not been awakened out of an uneven sleep by a peculiar noise, heavy, yet not loud, steady, rushing and powerful — a kind of hushed but violent thumping. She felt she knew the noise — could almost certainly lay her finger on it, it was that familiar — yet she could not say what it was.

With tensed alert muscles she sat up in bed listening. The sound seemed to come from across the room. It was dark, yet through the gloom, in the space between the wall and the other bed, she thought she saw something

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plunging to and fro, surging in mad dips against the bare floor boards. And suddenly she knew. Her heart nearly stopped beating altogether for a moment, and a numb feeling crept over her. She would not believe it. It was not possible. Yet like a madness the sound went on in her ears — a steady violent thumping. With trembling icy fingers she switched on the light. The room sprang to life under the blaze. The rocker, Alberta's rocker, stood motionless beside her empty bed.

By morning Martha was certain it had all been a dream, more accurately a nightmare, for the anxiety and fear told plainly on her face. But after some difficulty she succeeded in dismissing it from her mind. The thing of it was it would not stay dismissed. It recurred the next night with a tantalizing closeness. Again she was aroused out of sleep by the powerful rushing noise, the thumping against the floor boards. Instantly, she snapped on the light. The rocker was still, but this time the noise of it, the steady violent thumping, continued loudly in her ears.

It kept recurring night after night in maddening succession. It took all the will she had to shut this thing up in herself, but bury it she must, like the dark bitter worm inside her, not to show or tell, to be forever hidden, woven into the quiet intimacy of herself. She continued to stay alone in her room, keeping to it most of the day now, knitting, or just walking about lifting things off the bureau top and setting them down again, stirring now and then like a bird in its cage.

She had not taken a look at herself in the mirror for some time, and probably would not have bothered if Miss Parner had not said to her one day, "Are you feeling well, Mrs. Colby?" What she saw in the glass gave her quite a start. Across her white aristocratic brow, wrinkles like gashes stretched in horizontal rows. The stamp of an indelible frown sat on her face, as if years of ill-temper had finally worn its grooves. She stared with indivisible attention at her eyes that had been thought quite beautiful. Surrounded now by dark hollows, they appeared to be retreating into their bone-rimmed sockets, and the creamy flesh of her face had taken on a papery gray pallor.

She inspected carefully every inch of her face, depressed at what she saw. There was no excuse for it. She would simply have to take better care. Immediately she set about redoing the frosted wave atop her head.

After fussing for some time she decided the high pompadour no longer suited her. It gave emphasis to her brow and the bony structure of her face. What she needed was a new and different hair style, one to lessen the expanse of forehead, to give her a softer more secretive look.

It was tiresome work, yet she persisted, dropping her arms when the fatigue got too much. And after a time she felt she had come upon something flattering: a low, on-the-face coiffure that seemed to have the

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proper veiled appeal. The longer she surveyed it the more convinced she was that she had found the right thing: a hair-do to suit her personality. She wondered why she had not thought of it before — two soft waves, dips, coming down from a center-part over the forehead. It did just the right thing for her. Instantly, she felt reclaimed, like a dry plant that quickly revives in the rain.

To get her proper rest Martha found she had to take more frequent naps during the day, because for several weeks now the rocker had continued its wild nocturnal ride. She never saw it taking the long swift dips back and forth, but she heard it clearly. At first she was angry at it for spoiling her sleep, for resurrecting what was buried. She began to appeal to it wistfully, even talking to it in a forlorn pathetic way. It was mocking her, she felt, and her dignity was offended. One morning she resolved to get it out of her room, but Miss Parner thought the rocker all right where it was and would not have it moved. So Martha resigned herself, and after a time even came to accept its peculiar behavior as a charming idiosyncrasy. She would be awake most nights anyway, and the steady plunging to and fro was in a way an anchor for her wavering thoughts.

Except for meals, Martha now kept entirely to her room. Little things amused her: the teeth of her comb, the bristles in her hair brush; any trifling object that happened to be lying around. She wandered about the room, preoccupied with vague trifling things, feeling a bit untidy in her mind but burrowing nevertheless into corners and bureau drawers and closets in a soft dreamy fashion.

One afternoon, as she sauntered aimlessly about the room, she chanced to look down at the floor, and it occurred to her that occupying her room all day as she was, the floor was showing its use. So when no one was about, she got a bucket from the utensil closet in the hall, a shiny new pail, and swinging it rather excitedly, she returned with it to her room. The floor most certainly was in need of a scrubbing. Why had she not thought of it before, she wondered? Well, no matter. From then on she would see to it. And instead of going in search of the pail each time the floor wanted scrubbing, she would keep the bucket in her closet. The notion pleased her; she smiled wanly and her head bobbed a little as she scrubbed. She was still on her knees when a loud double-rap sounded at the door.

"Come in," she said sweetly, without thinking, then was aware of a white starched uniform and an elegant black dress beside it. She glanced up, wondering vaguely at the surprised look on Miss Parner's face, then shifted her gaze to the slender figure standing next to the nurse. The woman had about her an air of considerable distinction which told in her thin creamy face, in the royal arch to her brows. A great spray of snowy hair swept up over her expansive forehead, and she looked down

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at Martha with a light haughtiness in her manner.

Miss Parner broke the silence. "Why, Mrs. Colby, what are you doing?" she asked, a note of incredulity in her voice.

"The floor is dirty," answered Martha serenely.

"But the porter takes care of it. Come, get up. Here, let me help you." She drew Martha to her feet and sat her down in the rocker. "I've brought you a roommate," she said pleasantly. "This is Mrs. Nelson — Mrs. Amanda Nelson. I'm sure you'll both get along splendidly."

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Nelson formally, in a soft well-mannered voice as she extended a frail shapely hand.

Martha's sharp little fingers, curving down over the arms of the rocker, gave no response. "Roommate," she muttered vaguely, looking blankly up at the newcomer, who let her hand fall and stood very straight, drawing her dignity like a cloak about her.

"Mrs. Nelson's come to stay with you. You'll have company now. Won't that be nice?" said Miss Parner.

"Nice. Nice," repeated Martha absently, lost in her own vague dream and lulled by the steady lilt of the rocker.

"Well," said Miss Parner, perking in her starched efficient way, "I'll leave you two to get acquainted." She gave a flick here and a tug there to the odds and ends scattered on the bureau, and in a small flurry the door closed behind her.

The two women faced each other in silence, Martha plunging, surging, dipping, Mrs. Nelson coolly viewing the compressed immobile mouth, the twin loops of hair like curtain drapes that lurched back and forth beneath her in a dizzying rhythm. Quickly, and with a slight shudder, she turned away and walked over to the windows. "It's terribly stuffy in here. I hope you don't mind." With an effort she threw the windows open.

Instantly, Martha brought the rocker to an abrupt halt. She looked up at Mrs. Nelson through tiny sparks of eyes. "Closed," she snapped viciously. "I want them closed." She tilted forward, the corners of her mouth sagging wearily. "Closed," she parroted mechanically. "Closed." Her voice trailed off abstractedly as she resumed her rocking.

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Perhaps the question most commonly asked of writers in general, and of detective-story writers in particular, is: Where in the world do you get your plots?

Most writers develop a stock answer, usually compounded of double-talk and evasion. But Edgar Wallace always met the challenge in specific terms. Here is one of his replies to the inevitable question, as given to the English journalist, James Dunn, as the two of them were walking down Whitefriars Street in London, passing Hanging Sword Alley:

"There are plots everywhere," Edgar Wallace chuckled. Dramatically he pointed to a tiny window covered by a shabby curtain. "Here's a plot! There's a murderer behind that curtain. He's hiding there just like the old cut-throats did. Here he is in the heart of Fleet Street, where everybody is looking for him and nobody knows where he is. The Flying Squad is out. The Police Gazette has got his picture. Every station in the country is warned; but there he is, quite safe, and he will come down and have a steak in that little restaurant over there with a cop walking past the door. D—— it — I'll write it!"

And while we cannot quote chapter and verse, among Edgar Wallace's prolific output, we have no doubt that somewhere in Wallace's vast criminological corpus is a tale of a murderer peering out from behind a dirty curtain, watching a bobby stroll by who is daydreaming of the reward on the killer's head — if only he knew where to pounce on him.

But the Edgar Wallace story we now bring you is not *that one — at least, we don't think so. Who knows what the embryo of a plot may grow into . . . Whatever its true origin, "The Man Who Sang in Church" is one of James Hilton's twelve favorite detective short stories . . .*

THE MAN WHO SANG IN CHURCH

by EDGAR WALLACE

To Leon Gonsalez went most of the cases of blackmail which came the way of the Three Just Men.

And yet, from the views he had so consistently expressed, he was the last man in the world to whom such problems should have gone, for in that famous article of his entitled *Justification*, which put up the sales of a quarterly magazine by some thousand per cent, he offered the following opinion:

". . . as to blackmail, I see no adequate punishment but death in

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the case of habitual offenders. You cannot parley with the type of criminal who specializes in this loathsome form of livelihood. Obviously, there can be no side of him to which appeal can be made: no system of reformation can affect him. He is dehumanized, and may be classified with the secret poisoner, the baby-farmer, and . . ."

He mentioned a trade as unwholesome.

Leon found less drastic means of dealing with these pests; yet we may suppose that the more violent means which distinguished the case of Miss Brown and the man who sang in church had his heartiest approval.

There are so many types of beauty that even Leon Gonsalez, who had a passion for classification, gave up at the eighteenth subdivision of the thirty-third category of brunettes. By which time he had filled two large notebooks.

If he had not wearied of his task before he met Miss Brown, he would assuredly have recognized its hopelessness, for she fell into no category, nor had he her peculiar attractions catalogued in any of his subsections. She was dark and slim and elegant. Leon hated the word, but he was compelled to admit this characteristic. The impression she left was one of delicate fragrance. Leon called her the Lavender Girl. She called herself Brown, which was obviously not her name; also, in the matter of simulations, she wore one of those closely fitting hats that came down over a woman's eyes and might make subsequent identification extremely difficult.

She timed her visit for the half-light of dusk — the cigarette hour that follows a good dinner, when men are inclined rather to think than to talk, and to doze than either.

Others had come at this hour to the little house in Curzon Street, where the silver triangle on the door marked the habitation of the Three Just Men, and when the bell rang George Manfred looked up at the clock.

"It is too early for the post — see who it is, Raymond: and before you go, I will tell you. It is a young lady in black, rather graceful of carriage, very nervous, and in bad trouble."

Leon grinned as Poiccart rose heavily from his chair and went out.

"Clairvoyance rather than deduction," he said, "and observation rather than either: from where you sit you can see the street. Why mystify our dear friend?"

George Manfred sent a ring of smoke to the ceiling.

"He is not mystified," he said lazily. "He has seen her also. If you hadn't been so absorbed in your newspaper you would have seen her, too. She has passed up and down the street three times on the other side. And on each occasion she has glanced toward this door. She is rather typical, and I have been wondering exactly what variety of blackmail has been practised on her."

Here Raymond Poiccart came back.

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"She wishes to see one of you," he said. "Her name is Miss Brown — but she doesn't look like a Miss Brown!"

Manfred nodded to Leon.

"It had better be you," he said.

Gonsalez went to the little front drawing-room and found the girl standing with her back to the window, her face in shadow.

"I would rather you did not put on the light, please," she said, in a calm, steady voice. "I do not wish to be recognized if you meet me again."

Leon smiled.

"I had no intention of touching the switch," he said. "You see, Miss——" he waited expectantly.

"Brown," she replied, so definitely that he would have known she desired anonymity even if she had not made her request in regard to the light. "I told your friend my name."

"You see, Miss Brown," he went on, "we have quite a number of callers who are particularly anxious not to be recognized when we meet them again. Will you sit down? I know that you have not much time, and that you are anxious to catch a train out of town."

She was puzzled.

"How did you know that?" she asked.

Leon made one of his superb gestures.

"Otherwise you would have waited until it was quite dark before you made your appointment. You have, in point of fact, left it just as late as you could."

She pulled a chair to the table and sat down slowly, turning her back to the window.

"Of course that is so," she nodded — "Yes, I have to cut it fine. Are you Mr. Manfred?"

"Gonsalez," he corrected her.

"I want your advice," she said.

She spoke in an even, unemotional voice, her hands lightly clasped before her on the table. Even in the dark, and unfavorably placed as she was for observation, he could see that she was beautiful. He guessed from her voice that she was about twenty-four.

"I am being blackmailed. I suppose you will tell me I should go to the police, but I am afraid the police would be of no assistance, even if I were willing to risk an appearance in court, which I am not. My father —" she hesitated — "is a government official. It would break his heart if he knew. What a fool I have been!"

"Letters?" asked Leon, sympathetically.

"Letters and other things," she said. "About six years ago I was a medical student at St. John's Hospital. I did not take my final exam. for reasons which you will understand. My surgical knowledge has not been of very much use to me, except . . . well, I once saved a man's life, though I doubt if it was worth saving. He seems to think it was, but that has nothing to do with the case. When I was at St. John's I got to know a fellow-student, a man whose name will not interest you, and, as girls of

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my age sometimes do, I fell desperately in love with him. I did not know that he was married, although he told me this before our friendship reached a climax.

"For all that followed I was to blame. There were the usual letters ——"

"And these are the basis of the blackmail?" asked Leon.

She nodded.

"I was worried ill about the . . . affair. I gave up my work and returned home; but that doesn't interest you, either."

"Who is blackmailing you?" asked Leon.

She hesitated.

"The man. It is horrible, isn't it? But he has gone down and down. I have money of my own — my mother left me £2,000 a year — and of course I have paid."

"When did you see this man last?"

She was thinking of something else, and she did not answer him. As he repeated the question, she looked up quickly.

"Last Christmas Day — only for a moment. He was not staying with us — I mean it was at the end of . . ."

She had become suddenly panic-stricken, confused, and was almost breathless as she went on: "I saw him by accident. Of course he did not see me, but it was a great shock. . . . It was his voice. He always had a wonderful tenor voice."

"He was singing?" suggested Leon, when she paused, as he guessed, in an effort to recover her self-possession.

"Yes, in church," she said, desperately. "That is where I saw him."

She went on speaking with great rapidity, as though she were anxious not only to dismiss from her mind that chance encounter, but to make Leon also forget.

"It was two months after this that he wrote to me — he wrote to our old address in town. He said he was in desperate need of money, and wanted £500. I had already given him more than £1,000, but I was sane enough to write and tell him I intended to do no more. It was then that he horrified me by sending a photograph of the letter — of one of the letters — I had sent him. Mr. Gonsalez, I have met another man, and . . . well, John had read the news of my engagement."

"Your fiancé knows nothing about this earlier affair?"

She shook her head.

"No, nothing, and he mustn't know. Otherwise everything would be simple. Do you imagine I would allow myself to be blackmailed any further but for that?"

Leon took a slip of paper from one pocket and a pencil from another.

"Will you tell me the name of this man? John ——"

"John Letheritt, 27 Lion Row, Whitechurch Street. It is a little room that he has rented, as an office and a sleeping place. I have already had inquiries made."

Leon waited.

"What is the crisis? Why have you come now?" he asked.

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She took from her bag a letter, and he noted that it was in a clean envelope; evidently she had no intention that her real name and address should be known.

He read it and found it a typical communication. The letter demanded £3,000 by the third of the month, failing which the writer intended putting "papers" in "certain hands." There was just that little touch of melodrama which for some curious reason the average blackmailer adopts in his communiqués.

"I will see what I can do. How am I to get in touch with you?" asked Leon. "I presume that you do not wish that either your real name or your address should be known even to me."

She did not answer until she had taken from her bag a number of banknotes.

Leon smiled.

"I think we will discuss the question of payment when we have succeeded. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get the letters, and, if it is possible, I want you so to frighten this man that he will not trouble me again. As to the money, I shall feel so much happier if you will let me pay you now."

"It is against the rules of the firm," said Leon cheerfully.

She gave him a street and a number which he guessed was an accommodation address.

"Please don't see me to the door," she said, with a half-glance at the watch on her wrist.

He waited till the door closed behind her, and then went upstairs to his companions.

"I know so much about this lady that I could write a monograph on the subject," he said.

"Tell us a little," suggested Manfred. But Leon shook his head.

That evening he called at Whitechurch Street. Lion Row was a tiny, miserable thoroughfare, more like an alley than anything, and hardly deserved its grand designation. In one of those ancient houses which must have seen the decline of Alsatia, at the top of three rickety flights of stairs, he found a door on which had been recently painted:

J. LETHERITT, EXPORTER

His knock produced no response.

He knocked again more heavily, and heard the creaking of a bed, and a harsh voice asking on the other side who was there. It took some time before he could persuade the man to open the door, and then Leon found himself in a very long, narrow room, lighted by a shadeless electric table-lamp. The furniture consisted of a bed, an old washstand, and a dingy desk piled high with unopened circulars.

He guessed the man who confronted him, dressed in a soiled shirt and trousers, to be about thirty-five; he certainly looked older. His face was unshaven and there was in the room an acrid stink of opium.

"What do you want?" growled

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John Letheritt, glaring suspiciously at the visitor.

With one glance Leon had taken in the man — a weakling, he guessed — one who had found and would always take the easiest way. The little pipe on the table by the bed was a direction post not to be mistaken.

Before he could answer, Letheritt went on:

"If you have come for letters you won't find them here, my friend." He shook a trembling hand in Leon's face. "You can go back to dear Gwenda and tell her that you are no more successful than the last gentleman she sent."

"A blackmailer, eh? You are the dirtiest little blackmailer I ever met," mused Leon. "I suppose you know the young lady intends to prosecute you?"

"Let her prosecute! Let her get a warrant and have me pinched! It won't be the first time I've been inside. Maybe she can get a search warrant, then she will be able to have her letters read in court. I'm saving you a lot of trouble. I'll save Gwenda trouble, too! Engaged, eh? You're not the prospective bridegroom?" he sneered.

"If I were, I should be wringing your neck," said Leon calmly. "If you are a wise man ——"

"I am not wise," snarled the other. "Do you think I would be living in this pigsty if I were? I . . . a man with a medical degree?"

Then, with a sudden rage, he pushed his visitor towards the door.

"Get out and stay out!"

Leon was so surprised by this onslaught that he was listening to the door being locked and bolted against him before he realized what had happened.

From the man's manner he was certain that the letters were in that room — there were a dozen places where they might be hidden: he could have overcome Letheritt with the greatest ease, bound him to the bed, and searched the room, but in these days the Three Just Men were very law-abiding people.

Instead he came back to his friends late that night with the story of his partial failure.

"If he left the house occasionally, it would be easy — but he never goes out. I even think that Raymond and I could, without the slightest trouble, make a very thorough search of the place. Letheritt has a bottle of milk left every morning, and it should not be difficult to put him to sleep if we reached the house a little after the milkman."

Manfred shook his head.

"You'll have to find another way; it's hardly worthwhile antagonizing the police," he said.

"Which is putting it mildly," murmured Poiccart. "Who's the lady?"

Leon repeated almost word for word the conversation he had had with Miss Brown.

"There are certain remarkable facts in her statement, and I am pretty sure they *were* facts, and that she was not trying to deceive me," he said.

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"Curious Item No. 1 is that the lady heard this man singing in church last Christmas Day. Is Mr. Letheritt the kind of person one would expect to hear exercising his vocal organs on Christmas carols? My brief acquaintance with him leads me to suppose that he isn't. Curious Item No. 2 was the words: 'He was not staying with us,' or something of that sort; and he was 'nearing the end' — of what? Those three items are really remarkable!"

"Not particularly remarkable to me," growled Poiccart. "He was obviously a member of a house party somewhere, and she did not know he was staying in the neighborhood, until she saw him in church. It was near the end of his visit."

Leon shook his head.

"Letheritt has been falling for years. He has not reached his present state since last Christmas; therefore he must have been as bad — or nearly as bad — nine months ago. I really have taken a violent dislike to him, and I must get those letters."

Manfred looked at him thoughtfully.

"They would hardly be at his banker's, because he wouldn't have a banker; or at his lawyer's, because I should imagine that he is the kind of person whose acquaintance with law begins and ends in the criminal courts. I think you are right, Leon; the papers are in his room."

Leon lost no time. Early the next morning he was in Whitechurch Street, and watched the milkman ascend to the garret where Letheritt had his foul habitation. He waited till the milkman had come out and disappeared, but, sharp as he was, he was not quick enough. By the time he had reached the top floor, the milk had been taken in, and the little phial of colorless fluid which might have acted as a preservative to the milk was unused.

The next morning he tried again, and again he failed.

On the fourth night, between the hours of one and two, he managed to gain an entry into the house, and crept noiselessly up the stairs. The door was locked from the inside, but he could reach the end of the key with a pair of narrow pliers he carried.

There was no sound from within when he snapped back the lock and turned the handle softly. But he had no way to deal with the bolts.

The next day he came again, and surveyed the house from the outside. It was possible to reach the window of the room, but he would need a very long ladder, and after a brief consultation with Manfred he decided against this method.

Manfred made a suggestion.

"Why not send him a wire, asking him to meet your Miss Brown at Liverpool Street Station? You know her Christian name?"

Leon sighed wearily.

"I tried that on the second day, my dear chap, and had little Lew Leveson on hand to 'whizz' him the moment he came into the street in case he was carrying the letters."

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"By 'whizz' you mean to pick his pocket? I can't keep track of modern thief slang," said Manfred. "In the days when I was actively interested, we used to call it 'dip'."

"You are *démodé*, George; 'whizz' is the word. But of course the beggar didn't come out. If he owed rent I could get the brokers put in; but he does not owe rent. He is breaking no laws, and is living a fairly blameless life — except, of course, one could catch him for being in possession of opium. But that would not be much use, because the police are rather chary of allowing us to work with them."

He shook his head.

"I am afraid I shall have to give Miss Brown a very bad report."

It was not until a few days later that he actually wrote to the agreed address, having first discovered that it was, as he suspected, a small stationer's shop where letters could be called for.

A week later Superintendent Meadows, who was friendly with the Three, came down to consult Manfred on a matter of a forged Spanish passport, and since Manfred was an authority on passport forgeries and had a fund of stories about Spanish criminals, it was long after midnight when the conference broke up.

Leon, who needed exercise, walked to Regent Street with Meadows, and the conversation turned to Mr. John Letheritt.

"Oh, yes, I know him well. I took him two years ago on a false pretense charge, and got him eighteen months at the London Assizes. A real bad egg, that fellow, and a bit of a 'squeaker,' too. He's the man who put away Joe Lenthall, the cleverest cat burglar we've had for a generation. Joe got ten years, and I shouldn't like to be this fellow when Joe comes out!"

Suddenly Leon asked a question, and when the other had answered, his companion stood stock-still in the middle of the deserted Hanover Square and doubled up with silent laughter.

"I don't see the joke."

"But I do," chuckled Leon. "What a fool I've been! And I thought I understood the case!"

"Do you want Letheritt for anything? I know where he lives," said Meadows.

Leon shook his head.

"No, I don't want him: but I should very much like to have ten minutes in his room!"

Meadows looked serious.

"He's blackmailing, eh? I wondered where he was getting his money from."

But Leon did not enlighten him. He went back to Curzon Street and began searching certain works of reference, and followed this by an inspection of a large-scale map of the Home Counties. He was the last to go to bed, and the first to waken, for he slept in the front of the house and heard the knocking at the door.

It was raining heavily as he pulled up the window and looked out; and in the dim light of dawn he thought

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he recognized Superintendent Meadows. A second later he was sure of his visitor's identity.

"Will you come down? I want to see you."

Gonsalez slipped into his dressing gown, ran downstairs, and opened the door to the superintendent.

"You remember we were talking about Letheritt last night?" said Meadows, as Leon ushered him into the little waiting room.

The superintendent's voice was distinctly unfriendly, and he was eyeing Leon keenly.

"Yes, I remember."

"You didn't by any chance go out again last night?"

"No. Why?"

Again that look of suspicion.

"Letheritt was murdered at half-past one this morning, and his room ransacked."

Leon stared at him.

"Murdered? Have you got the murderer?" he asked at last.

"No, but we shall get him all right. He was seen coming down the rainpipe by a City policeman. Evidently he had got into Letheritt's room through the window, and it was this discovery by the constable which led to a search of the house. The City police had to break in the door, and they found Letheritt dead on the bed. He had evidently been hit on the head with a jimmy, and ordinarily that injury would not have killed him, according to the police doctor; but in his state of health it was quite enough to put him out. A policeman went round the house to intercept the burglar, but somehow he must have escaped into one of the little alleys that abound in this part of the city, and he was next seen by a constable in Fleet Street, driving a small car, the number plate of which had been covered with mud."

"Was the man recognized?"

"He hasn't been — yet. What he did was to leave three fingerprints on the window, and as he was obviously an old hand at the game, that is as good as a direct identification. The City detective force called us in, but we have not been able to help them except to give them particulars of Letheritt's past life. Incidentally, I supplied them with a copy of your fingerprints. I hope you don't mind."

"Delighted!" Leon said.

After the officer had left, Leon went upstairs to give the news to his two friends.

But the most startling intelligence was to come when they were sitting at breakfast. Meadows arrived. They saw his car draw up at the door, which Poiccart went out to open to him. He strode into the little room, his eyes bulging with excitement.

"Here's a mystery which even you fellows will never be able to solve," he said. "Do you know that this is a day of great tragedy for Scotland Yard and for the identification system? It means the destruction of a method that has been laboriously built up ——"

"What are you talking about?" asked Manfred quickly.

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"The fingerprint system," said Meadows, and Poiccart, to whom the fingerprint method was something God-like, gaped at him.

"We've found a duplicate," said Meadows. "The prints on the glass were undoubtedly the prints of Joe Lenthall — and Joe Lenthall is in Wilford County Prison serving the first part of twelve years' penal servitude!"

Something made Manfred turn his head toward his friend. Leon's eyes were blazing, his thin face wreathed in one joyous smile.

"This is the prettiest case that I have ever dealt with," he said softly. "Now, sit down, my dear Meadows, and eat! No, no: sit down. I want to hear about Lenthall — is it possible for me to see him?"

Meadows stared at him.

"What use would that be? I tell you this is the biggest blow we have ever had! And what is more, when we showed the City policeman a photograph of Lenthall, he recognized him as the man he had seen coming down the rainpipe! I thought Lenthall had escaped, and phoned the prison. But he's there all right."

"Can I see Lenthall?"

Meadows hesitated.

"Yes — I think it could be managed. The Home Office is rather friendly with you, isn't it?"

Friendly enough, apparently. By noon Leon Gonsalez was on his way to Wilford Prison, and, to his satisfaction, he went alone.

Wilford Prison is one of the smaller convict establishments, and was brought into use to house long-time convicts of good character and who were acquainted with the bookbinding and printing trade. There are several "trade" prisons in England — Maidstone is the "printing" prison, Shepton Mallet the "dyeing" prison — where prisoners may exercise their trades.

The chief warder whom Leon interviewed told him that Wilford was to be closed soon, and its inmates transferred to Maidstone. He spoke regretfully of this change.

"We've got a good lot of men here — they give us no trouble, and they have an easy time. We've had no cases of indiscipline for years. We only have one officer on night duty — that will give you an idea how quiet we are."

"Who was the officer last night?" asked Leon, and the unexpectedness of the question took the chief warder by surprise.

"Mr. Bennett," he said. "He's sick today, by the way — a bilious attack. Curious thing you should ask the question: I've just been to see him. We had an inquiry about the man you've come to visit. Poor old Bennett is in bed with a terrible headache."

"May I see the governor?" asked Leon.

The chief warder shook his head.

"He has gone to Dover with Miss Folian — his daughter. She's gone off to the Continent."

"Miss Gwenda Folian?" and when

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the chief warder nodded, Leon continued, "Is she the lady who was training to be a doctor?"

"She *is* a doctor," said the other, emphatically. "Why, when Lenthall nearly died from a heart attack, she saved his life — he works in the governor's house, and I believe he'd cut off his right hand to serve the young lady. There's a lot of good in some of these fellows!"

They were standing in the main prison hall. Leon gazed along the grim vista of steel balconies and little doors.

"This is where the night warder sits, I suppose?" he asked, as he laid his hand on the high desk near where they were standing: "and that door leads ——"

"To the governor's quarters."

"And Miss Gwenda often slips through there with a cup of coffee and a sandwich for the night man, I suppose?" he added, carelessly.

The chief warder was evasive.

"It would be against regulations if she did," he said. "Now you want to see Lenthall?"

Leon shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said quietly.

"Where could a blackguard like Letheritt be singing in church on Christmas Day?" asked Leon when he was giving the intimate history of the case to his companions. "In only one place — a prison. Obviously, our Miss Brown was in that prison: the governor and his family invariably attend church. Letheritt was 'not staying with us' — naturally. 'It was at the end of' — his sentence. He had been sent to Wilford for discharge. Poor Meadows! With all his faith in finger-prints gone astray because a released convict was true to his word and went out to get the letters that I missed, while the doped Mr. Bennett slept at his desk and Miss Gwenda Folian took his place!"

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Heavens, I'll Be Killed!

Marie F. Rodell, formerly editor of Bloodhound Mysteries for Duell, Sloan and Pearce and now an authors' representative (more commonly referred to as a literary agent), wrote one of the very few textbooks on the detective-mystery story. It is called MYSTERY FICTION: THEORY AND TECHNIQUE, *and was published by D., S. and P. in 1943. Miss Rodell's dedication is one of the most interesting on record; it reads: "To Those Whose Manuscripts Have Taught Me What I Know about Mystery Fiction: Lawrence G. Blochman, Allan R. Bosworth, Carter Dickson, Erle Stanley Gardner, Eaton K. Goldthwaite, Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, H. H. Holmes, Geoffrey Homes, Dorothy L. Hughes, Veronica Parker Johns, Manning Long, Philip Mechem, Jeannette Covert Nolan, Lenore Glen Offord, Herman Petersen, Lawrence Treat, R. A. J. Walling, George Worthing Yates." A distinguished directory of detectival debtees — or is it the other way around?*

In any event, while preparing Marie Rodell's "Tell Me the Time" for the printer, it occurred to us to go back into her textbook and see what Miss Rodell had to say about heroines like Sally Turner — heroines who find themselves up to their lovely ears in mystery, menace, and Machiavellian machinations. On pages 20 and 21, Miss Rodell wrote: "The mystery [story] per se is the least rigid and most variable of the forms. Its chief emphasis is in the portrayal of human beings under acute emotional stress; the analysis of their motives and reactions . . . It is people who interest [the author] primarily, more than the solution of the puzzle, or the extreme emotional reaction of the reader . . . In its worst and lowest manifestations, the mystery [story] includes the egregious Had-I-But-Known mystery, the worst of the week-end party mysteries, the heroines who will wander alone in sinister attics, and the like."

Then, on page 96, Miss Rodell says: "Chief among [the trite techniques currently enjoying a great vogue of disfavor] is the technique known as the Had-I-But-Known, in which the narrator, usually female, keeps moaning she would have done it differently, had she but known what was to follow, and which, by its forewarnings of terror or disaster to come, inevitably prepares for anti-climax."

How does Miss Rodell handle the same perilous technique in her own work? Here, in short-story length, is a tale which has all the ingredients of the Had-I-But-Known school — all the advantages of portraying a human

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being under acute emotional stress, and all the possible pitfalls thereof. Does Miss Rodell avoid the 'tec traps, skirt the thin ice of gumshoe gushiness, hurdle the homicidal hazards? Read and judge for yourself . . . but we wish that all the other Had-I-But-Knowners were as conscientious and competent as Murder-Mistress Marie . . .

TELL ME THE TIME

by MARIE F. RODELL

She climbed the stairs wearily, putting one sodden foot before the other with conscious effort. Her hat drooped wetly about her ears and she could feel a damp trickle down her back from her hair. What a night to have had to work late. Irritably, she shifted the paper bag from left arm to right; the bread was probably wet, too, and the oranges seemed to weigh a ton.

Halfway up the stairs she stopped in exasperation. She had forgotten to stop at the janitor's for her radio. She had given it to him yesterday to fix. She struggled for a moment with inertia, feeling eighty-three instead of twenty-three. Go on up and forget it, or go down and have all those stairs to climb over again? She craned around the wet bundle to look at her watch. The darn thing had stopped at eight ten; it must be much later than that. Impatiently, she set the bundle against the wall on the landing, and squished downstairs.

But repeated knocks on Mr. Bangs's door brought no response. Out at the movies, she thought. Or more likely, judging by the color of his nose and the perpetual aura he carried with him, out at the local bar. She groaned. The steps to do over again, and all for nothing. She pushed the dripping hat back from her forehead and started up.

I wonder what time it is, she thought. *I went out for supper at six thirty; I was back in the office at seven; I must have worked at least two hours more.*

Panting and disheveled, she reached the top landing and crossed to her door, maneuvered the key from her purse, and pushed her way in. The door swung shut behind her. She groped for the little table, deposited the wet paper bag, and fumbled for the light switch. The lamp on the table made a dim yellow circle in the tiny hall, and through its glow she made her way to the bathroom, took off her shapeless hat and rain-soaked coat, kicked off her shoes and pushed the wet hair back from her face. Rain drummed steadily on the skylight, echoed faintly by the rain outside.

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It was a good night to be home. Mending to do, and the collar to be changed on the black wool dress, and she could listen to Jimmy Durante — but, of course, no radio. She wondered how late or early Mr. Bangs might be expected to return from his revels. She padded into the one big room that was all the rest of the apartment, switched on the light, and peered at the alarm clock. Its rigid black hands pointed sternly and untruthfully to five fifteen. It had stopped too.

Suddenly it became terribly important to know what time it was. Why, it might be any time. Nine — or eleven — or two in the morning. Nonsense, not two; she hadn't worked that long. She turned automatically to the bookshelf where the radio should have been, frowned in annoyance, and went around the day bed to the telephone. *ME 7-1212*, she dialed, and waited, noting abstractedly that the black dye from her suède pumps had run on her stockings, and too tired to care. Nothing seemed to be happening on the telephone. She hung up and dialed again. On the third try she realized there was no dial tone.

But this is ridiculous, she said to herself, and felt the thin edge of hysteria pushing up her throat. *Watch stopped, alarm clock stopped, no radio, phone out of order — how am I going to find out what time it is? . . . What difference does it make?* she admonished herself sharply. *Tomorrow is Saturday; no office, you don't need the alarm — what difference does it make what time it is?*

I could go down the stairs again, out to the corner drug store, and find out. Out into all that wet and muck again, down all those loathsome stairs and up again. It isn't that important. I won't.

She rose and stretched. Better get out of those wet stockings, that limp dress. But better feed Amy first.

Where was Amy? She had been too tired and disgruntled to miss her at the door; too preoccupied with time to notice her absence. Had that dratted cat got out again? That was really too much, it was the last straw — she couldn't go playing hide and seek with one small alley cat at this hour of the night. But even as she told herself that crossly, she rose and found her slippers and thrust her wet feet into them. She would have to go. If Amy was merely chasing dust motes in the hall or in the cellar, it would be all right; but if she had slipped into Mr. Cream's apartment again, or Mr. Miles's — They had both been most unpleasant last time it happened.

"I am allergic to cats," old Mr. Cream had told her stiffly, holding himself at a backward angle as if he might even react to her; "and I do not like cats, Miss Turner, and if this happens again I shall have to complain to the landlord. I believe, Miss Turner, that pets are not allowed in this building."

Mr. Miles had been briefer, but angrier, his square young jaw set forward. "Your cat knows nothing of architecture, Miss Turner," he

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said, "and her paw marks have not improved my blueprints." And he had turned away quite rudely and gone stomping off.

She sighed. Mrs. Layton, across the hall, didn't mind if Amy came visiting — but Mrs. Layton was away, had been for almost two months, so Amy could scarcely be there. Better make sure first she wasn't hiding somewhere in the apartment. Sally groped her way into the fastness of the overcrowded closet, peered into the bulging shelves of the linen closet — Amy's two favorite, because forbidden, retreats. No Amy. No hope for it then — she'd have to search the stairs and cellar. Impatiently she snatched up her handbag, fumbled for her keys, remembered that, as usual, she had left them hanging outside in the keyhole.

Hand on the doorknob, she frowned down at the small puddle her shoes had left on the carpet when she came in. She pulled at the door. Nothing happened. She tugged impatiently, then used both hands. She didn't remember that it had ever stuck like this before. She let go the knob, puzzled, then switched out the lamp on the table and bent to look at the tiny crack of light that came between door and jamb from the outside hall. Level with the knob, the light was interrupted by a bar of dark. The door was locked.

There is a very simple explanation, she told herself sharply. *The tumbler hadn't swung all the way back when you unlocked the door, when the door closed again the tumbler clicked forward — something simple like that. Just because you don't understand about locks and tumblers and things mechanical, it seems mysterious to you, but it's probably all very simple.*

But I don't like it, she said to herself. *Suppose it wasn't that. I don't know that a lock can do that, all by itself. And what am I going to do now? I can't stay here forever, with the door locked and the phone out of order and not even knowing what time it is.*

I could bang on the door and yell. Would anyone hear me? No one in Mrs. Layton's apartment across the hall. She hadn't noticed if Mr. Miles's windows were lit in the apartment just beneath her. She could stamp on the floor. Or lean out the window and yell.

And suppose he was home and came — what would she say? That square jaw of his would come forward in contempt, the blue eyes would reflect it: "*So you had to get out for that cat again, Miss Turner?*" And if Mr. Cream heard her and complained to the landlord — She couldn't. She simply couldn't. Mr. Cream's complaint would be bad enough, but she'd never give Mr. Miles the satisfaction — There had been a time, when Mr. Miles first moved into the house, a month or so before, when she'd thought him attractive. Ugly-tempered brute! She knew she was being unreasonable, but the fact that he had turned out to be so unpleasant made her feel as if he had deliberately betrayed her. No, she would certainly not try to get Mr. Miles's help.

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Her anger at the very idea steadied her. She sat down on the day bed. *Pull yourself together, Sally*, she told herself sternly. *Use your wits. Think of something else.* Eventually Mr. Bangs would be up with the radio — but that might not be for days. You had to prod him to do anything. Eventually, he would come up to sweep the stairs. But he did that as seldom as possible. His janitorial duties seemed to aggrieve him, they were intolerable interruptions of his perpetual reading of the racing forms; and if he was out getting a skinful tonight, he'd be in no mood to sweep tomorrow.

Eventually, there might be a special delivery letter — for ordinary mail, the postman didn't come up. But then suddenly she had it: the milkman. Of course. Crossing to the desk by the window, she printed a careful note in large black letters:

MILKMAN — I HAVE LOCKED MYSELF IN. PLEASE TELL SUPER TO LET ME OUT. S. TURNER.

That would do it. She folded it neatly, wrote *MILKMAN* again on the outside, and slipped it under the door, anchoring one corner under the rug inside the door to make sure it would not slither away. How comforting to see that small triangle of white gleaming against the walnut of the rug, the visible, tangible evidence of her only contact with the outside world.

She giggled to herself. *How to be shipwrecked in one's home. One easy lesson, free of charge, by Miss Sally Turner, private secretary extraordinary.*

Feeling unaccountably more cheerful, she went into the bathroom, took off the wet shoes and stockings and her damp clothes, rubbed herself briskly with a bath towel. *Might as well be shipwrecked in style*, she thought, and pulled from the closet the negligée usually reserved for visiting, and the special satin mules.

Too bad Mrs. Layton was still away; it would be nice to go visiting, to curl up on Mrs. Layton's pale gold brocade sofa, before Mrs. Layton's fire — only the more spacious and and more expensive back apartments had fireplaces — and listen while the tiny old lady told of her travels, in the days when Mr. Layton was still alive. He had run a small but very exclusive shop on Madison Avenue, and every year he went abroad, taking Mrs. Layton with him, to collect the fragile glass, the transparent china, the old jewelry and the miniatures his clients wanted. Mr. Layton had been dead some fifteen years now and the shop was long since sold, but here in her apartment Mrs. Layton still had some of the choicest bits: the twelfth-century icon, framed in beaten gold, that hung between the windows; the cluster of silver-filigree miniature furniture on the mahogany whatnot; the little white jade Buddha who smiled eternally at his reflection in the polished top of the coffee table.

Someday, thought Sally, *I'll manage all that too. I'll have a gold brocade sofa, a fireplace, an up-to-date kitchen*

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complete with electric stove and outsize refrigerator, fragile glass, smiling Buddhas. . . . A little difficult with Amy about, of course — Amy would be sure to knock over the glass.

Amy. Somewhere Amy was wandering about, mewing in distress perhaps, hungry, frightened. If she'd got out to the street? Determinedly, she pushed the thought of Amy from her mind. She couldn't have got out to the street; she was somewhere in the house, hungry perhaps, but dry and safe. A little fasting wouldn't hurt her.

Out in the little foyer, the wet paper bag leaned limply against the lamp. Sally scooped it up and carried it into the kitchen unit behind the screen in the big room and opened the refrigerator — the tiny, outmoded refrigerator so unlike the gleaming beauty across the hall. She took the damp oranges from the bag and thrust them in one by one, and then stood, frowning. Something was wrong. Oranges — butter — the glass dish with Amy's food — milk. *Milk.* That was what was wrong. The milkman had been here this morning — she had forgotten. He wouldn't be coming tomorrow. Her note was useless. Angrily she banged the door of the refrigerator shut and went to retrieve her message.

But there was no triangle of friendly white at the base of the door. The note was gone.

She stood for a moment looking down at the dark carpet where the corner of the note should have been. She had pushed it so firmly under the carpet's edge — it couldn't just have wafted off. She got down on her hands and knees and tried to peer under the door, but the crack was narrow and she could see nothing. *It doesn't make any sense*, she thought. What an evening of minor impossibilities! It was almost as if — as if there were a conspiracy to make her breath come short in panting gasps like this, her heart go thudding in her breast. She stood up again uncertainly. A strong draft could, she supposed, have tugged the paper out from under the carpet's edge. But where would a draft be coming from? Her own windows were tightly shut against the rain; Mrs. Layton's had been shut for two months. The door to the roof, at the top of the stairs, might be open. She stooped again and put her hand along the doorsill. If that door was open, she should be able to feel the air stirring. She felt nothing.

But, crouching there, she was suddenly quite sure that she heard something. The faintest thread of sound, familiar yet unnamable, and then, superimposed upon it, another sound — the creaking of old wood. Just once, faintly, and then it was gone. It could be only the old house groaning to itself. It could be someone on the stairs.

But if someone were there — If she called out — She rose slowly, listening, but the creak was not repeated. There was only that faint familiar noise and the sound of her own breathing. Her fingers clamped spasmodically on the doorjamb and she

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let out her breath slowly. Let it out slowly; but then — if *she* had been holding her breath — whose breathing —

Panic burst within her suddenly; wild, unreasoning panic, and she backed away from the door with a scream rising in her throat. Backed until the corner of the table nicked her sharply in the thigh, and, like a slap on the face, stilled the scream and forced the panic back. Her fingers uncurled from their cramped fists and she advanced toward the door again. *If there is someone there*, she thought, *I can't get out, but I can make sure no one else can get in.* Her fingers reached for the chain, her hand was uplifted to it; when there came a faint click. She stopped and shuddered against the wall. And as she watched, fascinated and unmoving as a rabbit before a snake, the door moved inward. In the darkness outside that should have been light, something moved; and then she felt herself slipping sideways while the door came down and exploded on her head.

Something rough and moist touched her nose tentatively and was withdrawn, tried her cheek, her chin. Something needle-fine prodded very gently at the arm she flung up to guard her face.

She opened her eyes. Amy's triangular face hovered above her, green eyes unwinking, white whiskers stiff, one paw advancing toward her to give her arm another gentle prod.

She turned her head and looked about her. She was lying in the little foyer, crumpled uncomfortably in one corner; a few inches from her nose the door swung gently, slightly, to and fro. Amy must have come in when the door opened. *When the door opened!* She shoved against it quickly with both hands, with all her strength, and pulled herself to her feet still leaning against it, found the chain and slipped it home. She realized dully that she felt awful. Her head ached monstrously and nausea was bitter in her mouth. *When the door opened!*

What had happened, really? She tried to think back, to reconstruct. The door had swung inward, something had hit her on the head — the door itself? Or something else . . . more purposive?

She was confused. Thought was impossible under the heavy burden of that headache. *I wonder what time it is*, she thought dully; all the questions and the puzzles of that monstrous evening seemed to have resolved themselves into that one inane query. *I wonder what time it is. You feel so lost when you don't know.*

Something brushed against her leg and she looked down into Amy's upturned, anxious face. She hadn't fed Amy. With both hands behind her pressed flat against the door, she pushed herself away from it. *Feed Amy. What time is it, please? Feed Amy. Time, please.* Like some subterranean monster, another question rose from the sea depths of her aching mind — who? — what? — who? — but she refused to allow it to come to

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surface. Two thoughts were all she could manage. Holding on to the wall, she made her way to the refrigerator, pulled open the door, took the glass dish of cat food from the shelf and very slowly, very carefully, lowered herself and it until it rested on the square of newspaper under the sink.

It took all her energy to pull herself up again. *Leave on your hands and knees*, a sly voice whispered to her; but, *I won't*, she answered, *it's ludicrous — and besides, it's undignified.* At her feet, Amy hunched down to the glass dish, and with her last strength Sally leaned over the kitchen sink and was most alarmingly and unpleasantly sick.

When that was done with, she knew she could do no more. Will power alone carried her stumbling around the screen and as far as the day bed, then she crumpled. There was a thud and a bounce as Amy joined her on the bed, and then she felt herself drifting off into a nightmare-haunted space where a giant clock with static hands fell continuously and monotonously on her head.

The morning sun lay fresh and clear across the foot of her bed when she awoke. She rolled over and stretched out her hand to scratch the soft fur between Amy's ears. Amy's back arched, her whiskers bristled as she opened her mouth in a wide yawn; then she sat down and began washing herself. Sally's eyes turned automatically to the alarm clock. And then she remembered. Like a physical sickness returning, the shadow of last night's terror fell across her again. She put one tentative hand to her head and winced as her fingers found the lump just back of the hairline. She sat up slowly and carefully; her head still throbbed, but the fierceness of the ache was gone.

She sat for a moment on the edge of the bed. What, really, had happened last night? Had the triple coincidence of watch, clock, and phone out of order imbued in her such a state of hysteria that she had imagined everything else? Or had there really been some malign agency that had locked her in, stolen her note, hit her over the head? *Nonsense*, said Sally, looking at the golden bars of sunlight, at the innocent, everyday façade of the building across the way. *Perfect nonsense. You were tired and wet and cross and you got hysterical. That's all.*

She stood up and went out into the little foyer. The chain was in place across the door. Quietly, almost hesitatingly, she withdrew it, then opened the door a crack and peered out. Outside, the familiar hall gleamed dully in its perpetual electric light. Hadn't the light been out last night when the door swung open? Or was that imagination too?

But as she started to swing the door closed again, two things caught her eye. One was a fluff of dust that was edging toward her from the other side of the hall; the other was a folded piece of white paper off to one side of the door frame — her note to the milkman. But then there must be a

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draft — it would explain the disappearance of the note, and the fluff of dancing dust — and since it wasn't coming from her apartment, it must be coming from Mrs. Layton's.

With a sudden giggle, it occurred to her that perhaps Mrs. Layton had come home the evening before, before Sally returned from work. *Goose*, she told herself. *That explains everything. She was probably there all last night, while you were feeling cut off from the whole human race. I'll go see, right after breakfast.*

She showered, put on sweater and skirt, and set the coffee going. Amy moved gravely to the dish of food that had been set out all night, gathered her haunches under her and broke her fast. Sally, eating her own breakfast, reminded herself she must report her telephone to the phone company right away. She'd go down now, telephone from the drug store, collect her radio from Mr. Bangs, and find out about Mrs. Layton.

She picked up her purse and opened the door. The keys still hung in the lock, on the outside of the door, and with a disgusted shake of her head she tucked them into her purse and started down. She had half an impulse to knock at Mrs. Layton's door first; but since she really didn't know what time it was, she'd better not. Mrs. Layton wouldn't thank her for waking her if it were six in the morning.

The descent of the stairs was not too good for her head, which started dull throbbing again as she rounded the turn on the second flight down. It was with a feeling of relief, therefore, that at that point she saw the scrawny figure of Mr. Bangs ascending. She stopped and waited for him to get within earshot, and when he came puffing to the landing below her, she leaned over and said softly, "Good morning, Mr. Bangs" — quite softly, in case it was really very early.

She had apparently startled him; his bony head with its few scraps of dusty hair jerked upward suddenly and his long red nose twitched as if he were smelling her out.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Turner," he said, also in a low tone.

"Have you got the time, please, Mr. Bangs?" she asked, and he nodded, pulled an old nickel watch from his pocket and consulted it.

"Seven thirty," he said. "You're up early, Miss Turner." It was almost a question.

"I wanted to ask you about my radio, Mr. Bangs," she said. "And I have to report to the phone company that my phone is out of order. I wonder if you'd mind doing it for me? I'm not feeling very well."

"Not at all." He had been standing motionless, but now he recommenced his ascent, trailing his bedraggled broom behind him. "Sorry you're not well, Miss Turner. Was there anything else?"

"Why — I was only wondering if Mrs. Layton's back," she said.

Mr. Bangs stopped with one foot in midair and looked at her in astonishment. "Mrs. Layton — why do you ask, Miss Turner?"

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"Why — there seems to be a draft in the hall upstairs, and my windows are closed. I thought perhaps she'd come back and hers were open. If she's not back, Mr. Bangs, perhaps you'd better look in and make sure nothing's wrong."

"I see," said Mr. Bangs. "Yes, perhaps you're right. I'll look in later on." He turned about as if to descend the stairs again. "I'll just go and report your phone and then, later —"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Bangs," said Sally, "would you come and do it now? I'm . . . worried."

He frowned at her a moment, as if in indecision, then nodded, leaned his broom against the wall, and began climbing again. She stood aside to let him pass, and then followed him up.

When they reached the top landing, Mr. Bangs pulled out his bunch of keys, then turned to Sally, who was standing on the top step. She made no move to go past him and with an almost imperceptible shrug he bent to the keyhole and opened the door.

After a moment, she followed him in. Mr. Bangs was standing in the middle of Mrs. Layton's living room, his back to Sally, facing the windows. One was open a few inches from the bottom. The faint familiar noise Sally had heard the evening before was stronger here, and she was about to comment on it when her attention was distracted by something else. From where she stood in the small hallway, she could see into Mrs. Layton's bedroom, and to the closet door, which stood slightly ajar. Between door and jamb, Sally could see very clearly the sleeve of a black-and-white tweed coat, the corner of a black Persian collar. But surely that was the coat Mrs. Layton had gone away in? Sally had been with her, to say goodbye when she left, and she remembered how smart and almost gay the tiny old figure had seemed in that coat. Startled, Sally took another two steps into the apartment, steps that carried her into the living room.

Mr. Bangs had turned from the open window and was looking at her. "What's wrong, Miss Turner?" he asked.

"Why — why, it looks as if Mrs. Layton must have come back after all. Her coat's in the closet — the coat she went away in. And . . . but, of course, now I know what that noise is — her refrigerator is on. So she must have come back."

But even while she was saying this, Sally's voice faltered and fell silent. For she had noticed something else. On the narrow panel between the two windows, where the twelfth-century icon in its gold frame should have hung, was only blank space, faintly lighter than the surrounding wall. She turned and looked at the whatnot; the faint film of dust on its shelves was undisturbed by one of the silver-filigree miniatures that should have stood there. And on the coffee table, no jade Buddha regarded his reflected image.

"Mr. Bangs —" she said. And then

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she stopped. For Mr. Bangs was coming toward her with a queer expression on his face, and even as she opened her mouth in astonishment to repeat "Mr. Bangs!" his two bony hands came forward, one to encircle her throat, one to cover her mouth.

Mr. Bangs's little red-rimmed eyes looked as if he were crying, and his dried lips were drawn back from tobacco-stained teeth as he whispered, "You fool. You interfering little fool." And then the hand about her throat tightened, a great tide of blackness rose in her, and she was falling —

This, thought Sally, *is where I came in.* For a rough, moist tongue was exploring her cheek, then a tiny, needle-sharp claw pecked gently at her arm. She opened her eyes. She was lying on Mrs. Layton's gold brocade sofa and Amy was marching up and down its arm, close by her head, stopping now and then to touch her with tongue or paw.

A voice said, "Feeling better?" and she looked up and saw young Mr. Miles. He was scowling down at her, his brown hair awry on his head, his pugnacious young jaw disfigured by a mottled patch of red.

"Yes," she said. "But what —" She turned her head and saw a pair of dark-clad legs stretched out on the carpet. Mr. Bangs's legs. The rest of Mr. Bangs seemed to be thoroughly enveloped in what was surely Mrs. Layton's piano scarf, tastefully bound round with Mrs. Layton's best tea towels. Mr. Bangs lay very quietly.

"I had to knock him out," said young Mr. Miles, and then scowled still more ferociously at her. "Would you mind explaining just why Mr. Bangs was finding it necessary to choke you?"

Sally sat up. Her throat felt sore and stiff and her head had begun to throb again. "I don't really know," she said hoarsely. "More queer things have been going on around here —"

"Maybe you'd better start at the beginning," said Mr. Miles.

"Well, I was working late at the office last night —". She told it all, just as it had happened.

Mr. Miles was, if anything, scowling harder when she had finished. "You're sure Mrs. Layton didn't put those things of hers away before she left?" he asked.

"Oh, quite sure," Sally said. "I was in here, saying goodbye and helping her close her bags — she had them stuffed to bursting, and she's so little, sitting on them didn't do her any good at all. And anyway, why should the refrigerator be going? And the window be open? And what's her coat doing in the closet?"

Young Mr. Miles shrugged. "You've got me," he said. "Where is this famous refrigerator?"

Sally pointed toward the kitchen.

Young Mr. Miles disappeared into it. His voice came back from around the angle of the door: "It's certainly big enough."

"Enormous," said Sally. "Hotel size, really — small hotel, I guess. She and Mr. Layton had it in their house

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in the country — in Connecticut — before Mr. Layton died. They used to entertain a lot, and they were miles from the stores, and had to keep lots of food on hand for days at a time. It must have been a lovely place — I wish I could have seen it." She was suddenly aware that she was getting no response to this chatter, and that Mr. Miles was taking a long time looking at the refrigerator. "What on earth are you —" she started to ask, and then stopped as he came back into the living room. He had such a queer look on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid — Wouldn't you like to go back to your own apartment now, Miss Turner?"

"Why — yes — of course," said Sally. "But what —"

"I'll have to attend to our friend here," said Mr. Miles, speaking very rapidly. "Send for the police, you know."

"But what —"

"Why don't you just go back to your own place and —"

"Stop," said Sally. She said it quite loudly and distinctly and Mr. Miles blinked at her in astonishment. "*What did you find in that refrigerator?*"

There was a moment's silence. Then young Mr. Miles shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you'll have to know sooner or later," he said. "I found — Mrs. Layton."

It must have been hours later that Sally answered the hundredth — or perhaps it was the thousandth — knock on her door, and admitted young Mr. Miles. The police had been in and out, the medical examiner and fingerprint men and reporters. Sally's head ached and her eyes felt dry and her heart numb.

"Sit down," she said.

He lit a cigarette, and sat watching her through the smoke. "You'd like to know what it's all about, wouldn't you?" he asked at last.

She nodded, still incapable of speech.

"The police found a letter in Bangs's pocket — a letter from Mrs. Layton, saying she'd be home yesterday evening around nine thirty, and asking Bangs to start the refrigerator and air the place out. Well, that put Bangs on the spot. It seems he had been helping himself to some of Mrs. Layton's little treasures, pawning them to get money with which to play the races. He expected to make a killing, of course, and redeem them before she got back. Only he'd lost instead of winning. And here was Mrs. Layton coming home, and what was he going to do?

"He came up, and turned the refrigerator on and opened the window, kind of automatically — that was what he'd been told to do. And then he realized he was really caught and he could see only one way out. Only he had to make sure you didn't interfere. He didn't have much time to plan, and he was slow-witted anyway. He didn't know when you'd be home, but it struck him as a good idea to cut your phone wires, just in case you heard anything and tried to

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phone for help. The rain was an unexpected piece of good luck; its sound helped cover whatever noise he had to make. Your coming home so late was a piece of bad luck; he hadn't counted on that. Mrs. Layton had already arrived by the time you came home — walked into a dark apartment, and been . . . surprised. But there were a few other things he had to attend to without being disturbed. So when he saw your keys hanging in the lock, he locked you in. Your note to the milkman made him curious, and he picked it up, then shoved it aside.

"I don't know what he expected to gain by what he did next — time, I guess. He took Mrs. Layton's coat off and hung it in the closet, then he took the shelves out of the refrigerator and put the poor old thing in there. She was so small, he managed it very easily. He hid her bags at the back of the closet and put her purse in a drawer. He wanted it to look as if she had never come home.

"When he'd finished in there, he came to unlock your door. Your milkman note had upset him; he'd hoped you wouldn't even know you'd been locked in. When he turned the key in your lock, the door swung open — and I think your being there right next to it probably took him as much by surprise as he took you. So he knocked you out, because he didn't or couldn't think what else to do.

"I don't know if he hoped you'd think you'd imagined the whole thing by this morning, or what. He probably didn't know what to expect; he wasn't terribly bright and he couldn't figure more than one step ahead at a time. But when you started asking questions this morning, and then followed him into Mrs. Layton's apartment, he lost his head and figured he'd have to kill you, too."

Sally shuddered back into her chair and locked her hands tightly together to still their trembling. "It was very lucky for me you came along," she said. "I haven't even thanked you. How did you happen —"

Mr. Miles smiled. *That's the first time,* thought Sally, *I've seen him do anything but scowl. He really is rather attractive.*

"It was that cat of yours," he said. "She must have got out again this morning, because she marched into my place when I started down for a paper. I was bringing her back to you when I passed the half-open door of Mrs. Layton's apartment and saw what was happening."

Sally reached down and scooped Amy up from her languorous pose on the floor. "You see," she said, "cats may not know anything about architecture, but they can be useful. Don't you think?"

"Defendant refuses to answer the question on the grounds it may incriminate him," said young Mr. Miles. "Any more questions?"

"Well, yes," said Sally, and suddenly found she could smile. "Could you tell me the time, please?"

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HORSESHOES FOR LUCK

by ANTHONY GILBERT

LUCK?" said the stranger on my left. "Tell that to the Marines. There's no such thing. It's nothing but superstition, and any sensible man will tell you the same. Look at these people that won't see the new moon through glass, throw salt over their left shoulder, won't walk under a ladder or sit down thirteen at table — are they any luckier than anyone else? You bet they aren't. I had a pal once, full of ideas about one thing being lucky and something else being fatal. He bought a pub, a free house it was, and he called it the 'Three Horseshoes.' Full of what he was going to do with it, make it into a regular hotel, with a garage and a bowling green. Bound to be lucky with a name like that, he thought. But the first week some loafer smashed up the bar, and the second week his wife skipped off with a commercial traveler, who hadn't even paid his account, and the week after that the barmaid helped herself to the till."

"He should ha' nailed three horseshoes over the door," said someone else.

"That wouldn't ha' made a scrap of difference," said my companion scornfully. "There's no such thing as luck. What do you say?" and he turned expectantly to Inspector Field.

"Anyone can have horseshoes for me," Field said promptly. "They're like that other superstition, that a man that's a gambler must be a good sportsman. It doesn't follow. Ever heard of Cheesehampton?"

Two or three men nodded. "They've got some very fine stables there."

"It's because of those very stables I went down there. It was a hotbed of racing folk. The time I was there was just before Goodwood, and I was there because one racing man wasn't quite the sportsman you might expect.

"The day before I started we'd heard from the local police that the people at Cheesehampton were being bothered with anonymous letters. You keep getting outbreaks in various parts of the country and sometimes they're dangerous and sometimes not. Mostly they're the work of lunatics. All sorts of quite ridiculous people were getting them, people who had no more reason to fear the police than an archangel. It wasn't so much that the letters constituted blackmail — mostly they were too silly for that — but some folk were getting upset and it was felt generally that the thing should be stopped. Whoever was responsible didn't ask for money: he'd put his meaning something like this:

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You think no one knows what happened at Brighton on the 4th June last. But I do. Beware.

It was like a story in a kids' magazine, but there must have been some truth in some of the suggestions, because people were jumpy. Even people who hadn't had letters were getting that way. Guilty conscience, I suppose.

"Well, this had been going on for some time when the writer overstepped his mark. There was a big man there called Bayliss, a rabid racegoer with his own stables. Apart from horses he really hadn't any life at all. He wasn't married, never opened a book, never heard a note of music. It was horses with him all the time. I'd been at Cheesehampton only a few hours when he came in waving one of these silly sheets.

" 'Look here,' he shouted, 'I'll tell you who this fellow is. Read this.'

"So I read it. It was the usual thing, written on the same kind of paper in the same obviously faked hand. It said:

If you do not withdraw Bluebeard from the race for the Cup, the whole world shall hear the truth about A.

" 'Who's A.?' I said, and he told me Alcock, his jockey, who was going to ride Bluebeard for the Cup.

" 'What's this chap talking about?' I went on, and Bayliss looked murder and said: 'About a year ago I had a couple of horses running in a big race, and biggish odds on both. I backed one heavily myself, and wouldn't say anything definite about the other. She was a mare and very temperamental, particularly in wet weather, as mares often are. That was a drenching summer, and though she could make a very good pace if conditions suited her, she was no use unless she was pleased. Alcock was up that day, and if anyone could have coaxed a spurt out of her he was the man, but she was sulky, and even he could do nothing. A neighbor of mine, another racing man called Grey, whose property marches with mine, had a lot of money on her; he'd seen Alcock exercising her and knew she could make a fine pace. Of course, I didn't tell him not to put money on her — what man would? Anyway, I'm superstitious enough to believe that if you start warning people against your horse it'll get the inevitable reaction. The result was that Grey backed her heavily and lost a packet; afterwards he came round breathing death and swore that Alcock had pulled the beast. It was so vilely untrue that I was tempted to take action. I told him, anyhow, he could go to the stewards, but naturally he wasn't going to chance being run in for libel, and the damages would have been pretty heavy. I'm well-known round here and so is Alcock, and Grey hadn't a leg to stand on, and knew it. Still, he did what he could by dropping hints here and there, nothing definite enough to take up, but deucedly unpleasant for me, and galling as hell for Alcock. Fortunately, from my point of view, he's not a very popular chap, and no one paid much attention. But what I am afraid

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of is that if the yarn goes round often enough, he may shake Alcock's confidence. The boy's got nothing to fear, actually, but if he gets the notion that anyone believes this ridiculous yarn, it'll shake him to pieces, and he'll be no use to me or anyone else. And Grey knows that. Naturally, I'm inclined to back my own stable, but I'm not the only man hereabouts that knows that Bluebeard, with Alcock up, will sweep the field next week.'

"I hung around picking up scraps of local talk, and I was told that Bayliss hadn't overstated the case. One man said: 'If Alcock were on a rocking-horse he'd get somewhere,' which might be intended as a compliment, but made the story Grey was spreading sound a bit more likely.

"Bayliss told me he hadn't any intention of taking any notice of the threats, but all the same he wanted some assurance that no harm should befall his jockey. I asked him what proof he had that Grey had actually written the letters, and he had to admit that there was none.

" 'Still,' he urged, 'no one else has a motive, while Grey's reeks to Heaven. He's running a horse of his own, and he backed him some time ago at very heavy odds. He's not a bad horse, either, but he won't stand a chance with Bluebeard, and both of us know it. Grey's in desperately low water, and everything depends on his beast winning the race.'

"It appeared that Grey's horse was second favorite, but there didn't seem much doubt in the minds of those best qualified to know that Bluebeard would beat him, though it might be a close thing. I found out, too, that Bayliss's story of Grey being very deeply dipped was no more than the truth.

" 'He'd get me warned off, if he could, but since he can't, he'll stop at nothing to put Bluebeard or Alcock or both where they can't threaten him.'

"You can see for yourselves it wasn't a very easy position. I couldn't accuse Grey of being the author of the anonymous letters, but it didn't seem to me any harm going round to see him. After all, he might have had one himself. Grey was a laconic sort of fellow; no, he said, he hadn't been pestered; people with nothing to hide generally weren't, which shows you how much he knew about human nature, or life, for that matter. I must say I didn't take to him — a big swaggering sort of chap, too well-dressed for me. I like tailor's dummies in a window, but nowhere else. Besides, his manner irritated me. You could see him putting a policeman in his place every time he opened his mouth. I came away feeling a good deal of sympathy for Bayliss.

"Coming through the village I ran against Bayliss again.

" 'Look here, Inspector,' he said, 'I've had another of these blasted things; and this time it's deadly serious.'

"The new letter read:

You had better withdraw your horse while you have the chance. Alcock will never ride him.

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"'That's tantamount to a threat of murder,' said Bayliss excitedly.

"'Threat of bodily harm perhaps,' I agreed, 'or it might just mean there's some monkey trick on foot to keep him out of the way till after the race. You'd better keep an eye on him.'

"I wasn't able to get any definite evidence against Grey, but I thought I'd feel a lot more comfortable when the race had been run. Going back, I thought it all sounded a bit silly; this is England, and you don't kidnap men in broad daylight. But it didn't sound so silly twenty-four hours later when a man as white as paper came to find me and said: 'If you please, sir, there's been an accident. It's Alcock. They've just found him in a clump of bushes over by Milton Heath.'

"'What's wrong with him?' I asked sharply, and though I think by this time I expected the answer I got, I felt a bit sick when the fellow said: 'He's dead all right. Been dead for some hours. Mr. Bayliss is half crazy.'

"'Thrown?' I asked, and the chap looked sick in his turn and told me: 'Must have been. And Bluebeard lost his head — he was always an excitable brute; no one but Alcock could ride him — and trampled on him.'

"I went along. They hadn't moved the body, because Bayliss, as soon as he heard, swore it was foul play, though it was as clear a case of a man being kicked by a horse as ever I'd seen. Alcock must have gone clean over the beast's head, we decided. Bluebeard had pitched him alongside a bracken clump, and the horse, either frightened by the accident or hurt itself, had done the rest.

"'It looks as though he saw Bluebeard meant trouble,' said Bayliss, who, I believe, was upset about the boy for his own sake, quite apart from losing the race. 'Look at the grass here; he must have tried to drag himself out of the horse's way. It's all crushed and trampled.'

"'Did he know this part of the country?' I asked, and was told that he brought the horse here every day.

"'Of course, I never supposed he'd come to grief, riding, and you can say what you like, Inspector, this isn't a natural death. Someone scared the horse crazy. He wouldn't have lashed out at his jockey otherwise.'

"I suggested the usual things — a sudden shot, though who'd be shooting there I couldn't suggest — a piece of paper blowing under Bluebeard's nose, though there was no sign of any — but Bayliss wasn't satisfied.

"All the same, it was difficult to see what else could have happened. The doctor said there could be no doubt about cause of death. Evidence showed that the upper part of the head had been crushed by a horse's hoof.

"'Are there any marks of ill-usage on the horse?' I asked, and Bayliss said he was all right except for a pair of cut knees, but naturally he wouldn't be able to run in the race forty-eight hours hence. That was when I began to think that, after all, there might be something fishy about the whole affair. A fall on turf and bracken doesn't

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result in cut knees. Grazing and scraping — yes — but cuts — no. When I saw the horse I got more suspicious still; I'm handier with a motor cycle, I confess, when it comes to getting about, but even I know a bad cut when I see one. The place where the accident had happened was just over a slope where a few trees grew, and as I thought about it a new idea came to me. I walked up to the trees and began to examine them, and I found, as I'd half begun to expect, marks on the trunks of two of them, where the bark had been rasped very recently.

"'What's the matter?' Bayliss demanded.

"'Just what I want to know,' I told him, and I began to hunt on the ground. I was remembering Bayliss's comment that the grass round the place where Alcock lay had been badly trampled. Well, I found the same condition here. Half a dozen men might have been stamping on it. Alcock hadn't threshed about much — the doctor was of opinion that he must have been killed outright by the blow — because there were no bloodstains anywhere, and in any case he had pitched several yards away from the trees. That looked as though it might have been trodden on purpose, and the purpose was to conceal footprints. You couldn't get the smallest trace from that mess. Presently, after about forty minutes, during which I thought Bayliss was going to break a blood-vessel — I found what I was looking for — two or three little chips of wire."

"You mean, someone had stretched wire across the path to make the lad take a toss?"

"Exactly. And it must have been someone who knew that Alcock would be coming hell-for-leather down that stretch. Well, that accounted for the cuts on the horse's legs, and whoever was responsible must have slipped out afterwards and cut the wire with a pair of clippers. That got us on a way and proved that Bayliss was right when he spoke of foul play; but it didn't mean that Grey was the man responsible.

"Bayliss nearly drove me off my head following me round and saying: 'It's murder, I tell you, murder! Bluebeard wouldn't trample his own jockey if he hadn't been frantic.'

"Someone suggested that the horse might have had his back to the jockey and so didn't know what he was doing, but that wouldn't work either. The position in which the lad was lying showed that. The queer thing was that, if Bluebeard had been in a state of frenzy, he shouldn't have smashed in the whole head. It looked as though there had been just one blow and that he'd cantered back to his stable.

"Well, I thought of this and that, tested a theory and turned it down, and then I asked to see the horse. He'd come back all right on his own account, so it didn't look as though there had been a plot to kill him. I wasn't even convinced yet that whoever was responsible had intended to kill the jockey. After all, there was no need to do that, and murder's an ugly

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game, with ugly consequences for the murderer.

"At the stables the grooms were looking a bit askance at Bluebeard. Nobody likes a horse that kills its jockey; besides, he was known to have a queer temper at the best of times. I said I wanted to see his feet. For a minute no one moved, then Bayliss came shoving past me and lifted the great feet, one after the other, for me to examine. As he stood back, saying: 'Well?' I felt myself sweating.

" 'You're right, sir,' I told him. 'There's more than a toss to this. It's murder.'

"You see, there wasn't a trace of blood on any of those four hooves. And yet Alcock had been killed by a blow from a horse, and the wound was too deep, too frightful, for no trace to be left on the shoe.

"Bayliss was still shouting that Grey was behind this, and I went off to inquire into Grey's movements, though I had to handle the affair pretty carefully. I hadn't an iota of evidence against the fellow. I asked him whether he'd been in the neighborhood of Milton Heath that morning, and if so, if he'd seen anyone hanging about, but he told me he'd spent his time at the golf club, going round on his own.

"Well, several people remembered seeing Grey at the club, and one man admitted he had lunched with him. I asked if he'd employed a caddie, but it appeared he hadn't. He felt he might foozle half his shots, he explained, and he'd feel less of a fool if he were by himself. Well, that was reasonable enough. Few men are heroes to their caddies. I inquired about Grey's stable, but it appeared none of his horses had been out that morning, and he hadn't hired a hack. Besides, he'd been on the golf course, and a man can't be in two places at the same time. The only thing I did discover that might conceivably help was that the golf course ran quite close to the place where Alcock had been found.

"I thought and I thought. Suppose he'd timed himself to be at this particular spot at the time when Alcock would probably be passing? Even so, how could he have been responsible for the jockey's death? He'd been carrying golf clubs, certainly, but Alcock had been killed by a blow from a horse's hoof.

"And then, suddenly, I knew what had happened. Don't ask me how. If it wasn't for these gleams of inspiration the life of a policeman would be harder than it is, and it's hard enough, heaven knows, what with criminals being so unsporting and detective writers giving them so many hints. I went down to see the village blacksmith.

" 'Shod any horses for Mr. Grey lately?' I asked him.

" 'One,' he told me. 'A mare. About a week ago.'

" 'Going a bit lame, wasn't she?'

" 'Well, no, not that I could see. Don't know what he wanted her shod for, come to that.'

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"But I knew. Grey had come down himself, which was a bit unusual, for he was one of these high and mighty chaps, who think themselves a cut above the rest of the world. After that I went up to Mr. Grey's house, choosing a time when he wasn't there, and told the servant that I was expected and I'd wait. They put me in the library and I routed among his books and found what I'd expected. Mind you, in a way I don't know that I wanted to find it, because even a policeman doesn't like to think of what humanity is capable of. But I was right.. I even got the weapon in due course, as ugly an object as ever I've seen." He took a pencil out of his pocket and began to draw something on the back of an envelope. "Know what this is?" he asked us.

Well, there wasn't much question as to that. It was a stick like a club, with a horseshoe on one end. When we began to understand, we knew what he meant when he said he'd half-hoped he wouldn't find it. There was a famous Continental criminal called The Spider, who'd liked making use of it. Paris was his happy hunting-ground, till they ran him down at last. His method was to get a couple of horseshoes and fasten them on to a wooden club, and you had as murderous an implement as any criminal could desire. Grey had read his story, and seen in it a fine chance to put Alcock out and secure his own future. He must have waited till the boy came past, took a toss over the wire, and then murdered him.

"But was that necessary?" we asked. "Wouldn't it have been enough if he'd incapacitated Bluebeard?"

"He couldn't afford not to put the jockey out of the way," Field told us, with a shade of contempt for our slower intellects. "Alcock would know the horse hadn't come down by himself. And Grey had got to clear the wire before anyone discovered his share in the plot. He literally didn't dare let Alcock live. And I suppose he thought he was safe enough. Any doctor would have sworn death was caused by the kick of a horse. There'd been a horse on the spot, a queer-tempered horse at that. Grey thought Bluebeard would get the blame, and he'd save his own skin. He was steeped in debt and worse; if he couldn't put up a considerable sum of money he'd have got five years, and I suppose he thought it was worth risking his life. He planned it all pretty carefully; the anonymous letters began arriving long before any hint of danger threatened Bayliss and his jockey. A more feeble criminal would have sent one to himself, but he didn't make that mistake. But it's a fact that no criminal ever remembers everything, and what Grey forgot was that there would be no blood on Bluebeard's hoofs. Or perhaps he thought no one else would think of that. And so," he wound up, passing his tankard to be refilled for the third time, "when I hear about horseshoes being lucky, I remember two men who were killed by them, as you might say, and it's not the kind of luck I'd appreciate."

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Different men are of different opinions,
Some like apples, some like inions . . .

While browsing through a first edition of Lynn Brock's THE DEDUCTIONS OF COLONEL GORE *— an uncommon book these days of reprint and reissue — we came upon two yellow-edged, crumbling newspaper clippings, stuck like a bookmark between two pages. The smaller clipping merely announced that "The Observer" of London offers a prize of three guineas for the best list of the six best mystery stories — Competition No. 462. The longer clipping is titled "Report on No. 462," and gives, not the winning list, but a composite list, "generally in order of [readers'] preference." The report itself begins by admitting the absurdity of trying to arrive at "the best six." One competitor expressed the opinion that it should have been the best three hundred; another suggested that the simplest way out was to choose "any six by Dorothy Sayers." "The Observer" itself had some curious observations to make: for example (and internal evidence dates this clipping about fifteen years ago), Robert Louis Stevenson "shows signs of wear" and "the same may be said of Poe"; also, "the public has made up its mind that [Edgar Wallace] is better suited to the environment of the railway carriage than of the library."*

Remembering that "in cases of maximum popularity only the first two books [of each selected author] have been included," here is the British ballot on the best bloodhound books, circa 1935:

TRENT'S LAST CASE, *by E. C. Bentley*
THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD, *by Agatha Christie*
THE NINE TAILORS, *by Dorothy L. Sayers*
AT THE VILLA ROSE, *by A. E. W. Mason*
THE MOONSTONE, *by Wilkie Collins*
THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES, *by Conan Doyle*
THE HOUSE OF THE ARROW, *by A. E. W. Mason*
THE MYSTERY OF THE YELLOW ROOM, *by Gaston Leroux*
STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE, *by R. L. Stevenson*
SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS, *by Dorothy L. Sayers*
THE CASK, *by Freeman Wills Crofts*
THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, *by E. A. Poe*
THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD, *by Charles Dickens*
THE WOMAN IN WHITE, *by Wilkie Collins*
THE RED HOUSE MYSTERY, *by A. A. Milne*

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THE CANARY MURDER CASE, *by S. S. Van Dine*
THE RINGER, *by Edgar Wallace*
THE RASP, *by Philip MacDonald*
THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB, *by Fergus Hume*
GREENMANTLE, *by John Buchan*
DRACULA, *by Bram Stoker*
THE BODY IN THE SILO, *by Ronald Knox*
THE SIX PROUD WALKERS, *by Francis Beeding*
THE INNOCENCE OF FATHER BROWN, *by G. K. Chesterton*
JOHN SILENCE, *by Algernon Blackwood*

The best, as of the year 1935? Twenty-five books — and precisely two Americans included! Surely in the last decade there has been a reappraisal in England of America's contribution and influence; surely in the last ten years the most rabid and patriotic British critics have readjusted their sleuthian sights, and would now admit that any definitive list of the twenty-five best "mystery stories" would have more American representation than a single title each of Poe and Van Dine.

Some of the "best" in "The Observer" list are astonishing, to say the least. Consider the inclusion of THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB. *The word "best" is a dangerous word indeed . . .*

Earlier this year Francis Steegmuller wrote an article on "mystery novels" for "The New York Times Book Review," and as a result one reader asked Mr. Steegmuller to nominate "the ten best mystery novels he has ever read." With understandable caution Mr. Steegmuller begged to be excused "from having to decide which are the 'ten best'," but he was willing to name "the following round dozen which [he] certainly enjoyed very much":

THE MINISTRY OF FEAR, *by Graham Greene*
BRIGHTON ROCK, *by Graham Greene*
THIS GUN FOR HIRE, *by Graham Greene*
THE BELLAMY TRIAL, *by Frances Noyes Hart*
BLUE HARPSICHORD, *by David Keith (pen-name of Mr. Steegmuller!)*
THE WHEEL SPINS, *by Ethel Lina White*
BEFORE THE FACT, *by Francis Iles*
JOURNEY INTO FEAR, *by Eric Ambler*
A COFFIN FOR DEMETRIOS [*sic*], *by Eric Ambler*
THE THIN MAN, *by Dashiell Hammett*
THE MALTESE FALCON, *by Dashiell Hammett*
THE GLASS KEY, *by Dashiell Hammett*

This too is a curious list, as of the year 1949. Either relatively few authors impress Mr. Steegmuller, or his reading of "mystery novels" has not been as comprehensive or catholic as it might have been. Nevertheless, it is

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interesting to compare the two lists, with less than fifteen years between them. Bearing in mind that half the titles in Mr. Steegmuller's list could not possibly have been included in "The Observer's" list — for the simple reason that these six books had not yet been published — still it is remarkable that there is not a single duplication of title and not even a single duplication of author!

Yes, 'tec times and 'tec tastes change — but not that much!

And now we bring you stories by two of Mr. Steegmuller's seven favorite "mystery" writers — not a bad percentage to achieve by pure accident. Elsewhere in this issue you will find an "unknown" story by Dashiell Hammett, and here is a new Graham Greene short-shocker.

P.S.: If any readers would care to submit their lists of the ten (or twenty or whatever number you wish) best mystery-detective stories (long or short, in separate lists or combined), we will be happy to tabulate the results, and print the winning titles, together with the names of all the readers making nominations. Please address your lists, lethal and larcenous, to the personal attention of Ellery Queen — this is a 'tec task after our own heart!

ALL BUT EMPTY

by GRAHAM GREENE

It is not often that one finds an empty cinema, but this one I used to frequent in the early '30's because of its almost invariable, almost total emptiness. I speak only of the afternoons, the heavy gray afternoons of late winter; in the evenings, when the lights went up in the Edgware Road and the naphtha flares, and the peep-shows were crowded, this cinema may have known prosperity. But I doubt it.

It had so little to offer. There was no talkie apparatus, and the silent films it showed did not appeal to the crowd by their excitement or to the connoisseur by their unconscious humor.

I suspect that the cinema kept open only because the owner could not sell or let the building and he could not afford to close it. I went to it because it was silent, because it was all but empty, and because the girl who sold the tickets had a bright, common, venal prettiness.

One passed out of the Edgware Road and found it in a side street. It was built of boards like a saloon in an American western, and there were no posters. Probably no posters existed of the kind of films it showed. One paid one's money to the girl of whom I spoke, taking an unnecessarily expensive seat in the drab emptiness on the other side of the red velvet cur-

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tains, and she would smile, charming and venal, and address one by a name of her own.

I remember I went in one afternoon and found myself quite alone. There was not even a pianist; blurred metallic music was relayed from a gramophone in the pay-box. I hoped the girl would soon leave her job and come in. I sat almost at the end of a row with one seat free as an indication that I felt like company, but she never came. An elderly man got entangled in the curtain and billowed his way through it and lost himself in the dark. He tried to get past me, though he had the whole cinema to choose from, and brushed my face with a damp beard. Then he sat down in the seat I had left, and there we were, close together in the darkness.

The flat figures passed and repassed, their six-year-old gestures as antique as designs on a Greek coin. They were emotional in great white flickering letters, but their emotions were not comic nor to me moving. I was surprised when I heard the old man next me crying to himself — so much to himself and not to me, not a trace of histrionics in those slow, carefully stifled sobs that I felt sorry for him. I said:

"Can I do anything?"

He may not have heard me, but he spoke: "I can't hear what they are saying."

The loneliness of the old man was extreme; no one had warned him that he would find only silent pictures here. I tried to explain, but he did not listen, whispering gently, "I can't see them."

I thought that he was blind and asked him where he lived, and when he gave an address in Seymour Terrace, I felt such pity for him that I offered to show him the way to another cinema and then to take him home. It was because we shared a desolation, sitting in the dark and stale air, when all around us people were lighting lamps and making tea and gas fires glowed. But no! He wouldn't move. He said that he always came to this cinema of an evening, and when I said that it was only afternoon, he remarked that afternoon and evening were now to him "much of a muchness." I still didn't realize what he was enduring.

Only a hint of it came to me a moment after, when he turned suddenly towards me, and whispered:

"No one could expect me to see, not after I've seen what I've seen," and then in a lower voice, talking to himself, "From ear to ear."

That startled me because there were only two things he could mean, and I did not believe that he referred to a smile.

"Leave them to it," he said, "at the bottom of the stairs. The black-beetles always came out of that crack."

It was extraordinary how he seemed to read my thoughts, because I had already begun to comfort myself with the fact of his age and that he must be recalling something very far away, when he spoke again: "Not a minute later than this morning. The clock

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had just struck two and I came down the stairs, and there he was. Oh, I was angry. He was smiling."

"From ear to ear," I said lightly.

"That was later," he corrected me, and then he startled me by reading out suddenly from the screen the words, "I love you. I will not let you go." He laughed and said, "I can see a little now. But it fades, it fades."

I was quite sure then that the man was mad, but I did not go. For one thing, I thought that at any moment the girl might come and two people could deal with him more easily than one; for another, stillness seemed safest. So I sat very quietly.

After a while he spoke again so low that his words were lost in the tin blare of the relayed record, but I caught the words "serpent's tooth" and guessed that he must have been quoting scripture. He did not leave me much longer in doubt, however, of what had happened at the bottom of the stairs, for he said quite casually, his tears forgotten in curiosity:

"I never thought the knife was so sharp. I had forgotten I had had it reground."

Then he went on speaking, his voice gaining strength and calmness: "I had just put down the borax for the blackbeetles that morning. How could I have guessed? I must have been very angry coming downstairs. The clock struck two, and there he was, smiling at me. I must have sent it to be reground when I had the joint of pork for Sunday dinner. Oh, I was angry when he laughed: the knife trembled. And there the poor body lay with the throat cut from ear to ear," and hunching up his shoulders and dropping his bearded chin towards his hands, the old man began again to cry.

It needed courage to stand up and press by him into the gangway, and then turn the back and be lost in the blind velvet folds of the curtains which would not part, knowing that he might have the knife still with him. I got out into the gray afternoon light at last, and startled the girl in the box with my white face. I opened the door of the kiosk and shut it again behind me with immeasurable relief.

"The police station," I called softly into the telephone, afraid that he might hear me where he sat alone in the cinema, and when a voice answered, I said hurriedly, "That murder in Seymour Terrace this morning."

The voice at the other end became brisk and interested, telling me to hold the line.

All the while I held the receiver I watched the curtain, and presently it began to shake and billow, as if somebody was fumbling for the way out. "Hurry, hurry," I called down the telephone, and then as the voice spoke I saw the old man wavering in the gap of the curtain. "Hurry. The murderer's here," I called, stumbling over the name of the cinema and so intent on the message I had to convey that I could not take in for a moment the puzzled and puzzling reply: "We've got the murderer. It's the body that's disappeared."

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What a problem Cornell Woolrich has posed for his sleuthian successor! House dick Striker is convinced that Room 913 is just a hotel room, nothing more; that the plaster, bricks, and wood of which the room is made are just that, nothing more; that the only way he, Striker, can get to the bottom of the mystery is to be the guinea pig — to himself challenge whatever sinister, terrifying, malignant force may exist in that room which drives its occupants to commit suicide.

Here is a classic criminological cliff-hanger, and no mistake!

To finish the story begun by Cornell Woolrich we have chosen — William Irish.

We leave it to you if we could possibly have made a more perfect choice. Cornell Woolrich described himself as in his middle forties, with brown hair and blue eyes, five feet nine inches tall, and a native New Yorker. Consider: William Irish is also in his middle forties, also has brown hair and blue eyes, also stands exactly five feet nine, and also was born in New York City. So far — perfect! But let us continue: Cornell Woolrich has won the national "Edgar" Award for his excellent work in the field of the detective short story; William Irish has also won the "Edgar" — and for the same outstanding contribution!

So, both in talent and in person, William Irish is l'homme juste *to accept Cornell Woolrich's challenge and write the tailpiece to the "Mystery in Room 913."*

Oh, yes: Mr. Woolrich mentioned that he is married on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Talk about 'tec twins! Mr. Irish tells us that he is married on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays . . . Sundays? And on the seventh day they finished their work which they had made, and they rested . . .

MYSTERY IN ROOM 913: The Murder Room

by WILLIAM IRISH

STRIKER made arrangements as inconspicuously as possible the next day, since there was no telling at which point anonymity ended and hostile observation set in, whether up in the room itself or down at the registration desk, or somewhere midway between the two. He tried to cover all the externals by which occupancy of the room could be detected without at the same time revealing his identity. Dennison, the day clerk, was left out of it entirely. Outside of Perry himself, he took only Maxon into his

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confidence. No one else, not even the cleaning help. He waited until the night clerk came on duty at 11:30 before he made the final arrangements, so that there was no possibility of foreknowledge.

"When you're sure no one's looking — and not until then," he coached the night clerk, "I want you to take the red vacancy-tag out of the pigeonhole. And sign a phony entry in the register — John Brown, anything at all. We can erase it in the morning. That's in case the leak is down here at this end. I know the book is kept turned facing you, but there *is* a slight possibility someone could read it upside-down while stopping by here for their key. One other important thing: I may come up against something that's too much for me, whether it's physical or narcotic or magnetic. Keep your eye on that telephone switchboard in case I need help in a hurry. If 913 flashes, don't wait to answer. I mayn't be able to give a message. Just get up there in a hurry."

"That's gonna do you a lot of good," Maxon objected fearfully. "By the time anyone could get up there to the ninth on that squirrel-cage, it would be all over! Why don't you plant Bob or someone out of sight around the turn of the hall?"

"I can't. The hall may be watched. If it's anything external, and not just atmospheric or telepathic, it comes through the hall. It's got to. That's the only way it can get in. This has got to look *right*, wide open, unsuspecting, or whatever it is won't strike. No, the switchboard'll be my only means of communication. I'm packing a Little Friend with me, anyway, so I won't be exactly helpless up there. Now remember, 'Mr. John Brown' checked in here unseen by the human eye sometime during the evening. Whatever it is, it can't be watching the desk *all* the time, twenty-four hours a day. And for pete's sake, don't take any nips tonight. Lock the bottle up in the safe. My life is in your hands. Don't drop it!"

"Good luck and here's hoping," said Maxon sepulchrally, as though he never expected to see Striker alive again.

Striker drifted back into the lounge and lolled conspicuously in his usual vantage-point until twelve struck and Bob began to put the primary lights out. Then he strolled into the hotel drug store and drank two cups of scalding black coffee. Not that he was particularly afraid of not being able to keep awake, tonight of all nights, but there was nothing like making sure. There might be some soporific or sedative substance to overcome, though how it could be administered he failed to see.

He came into the lobby again and went around to the elevator bank, without so much as a wink to Maxon. He gave a carefully studied yawn, tapped his fingers over his mouth. A moment later there was a whiff of some exotic scent behind him and the Youngs had come in, presumably from Mrs. Young's broadcasting station. She was wearing an embroidered

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silk shawl and holding the Peke in her arm.

Young said, "Hi, fella." She bowed slightly. The car door opened.

Young said, "Oh, just a minute — my key," and stepped over to the desk.

Striker's eyes followed him relentlessly. The register was turned facing Maxon's way. The Chinese lawyer glanced down at it, curved his head around slightly as if to read it right side up, then took his key, came back again. They rode up together. The Peke started to whine. Mrs. Young fondled it, crooned: "*Sh*, Shan, be a good boy." She explained to Striker, "It always makes him uneasy to ride up in an elevator."

The couple got off at the eighth. She bowed again. Young said, "G'night." Striker, of course, had no idea of getting off at any but his usual floor, the top, even though he was alone in the car. He said in a low voice to Bob: "Does that dog whine other times when you ride it up?"

"No, sir," the elevator man answered. "It nevah seem' to mind until tonight. Mus' be getting ritzy."

Striker just filed that detail away: it was such a tiny little thing.

He let himself into his little hole-in-the-wall room. He pulled down the shade, even though there was just a blank wall across the shaft from his window. There was a roof-ledge farther up. He took his gun out of his valise and packed it in his back pocket. That was all he was taking with him; no fantastics tonight. The fantasy was in real life, not on the printed page.

He took off his coat and necktie and hung them over the back of a chair. He took the pillow off his bed and forced it down under the bedclothes so that it made a longish mound. He'd brought a newspaper up with him. He opened this to double-page width and leaned it up against the head of the bed, as though someone were sitting up behind it reading it. It sagged a little, so he took a pin and fastened it to the woodwork. He turned on the shaded reading-lamp at his bedside, turned out the room light, so that there was just a diffused glow. Then he edged up to the window sidewise and raised the shade again, but not all the way, just enough to give a view of the lower part of the bed if anyone were looking down from above — from the cornice, for instance. He always had his reading lamp going the first hour or two after he retired other nights. Tonight it was going to burn all night. This was the only feature of the arrangement Perry would have disapproved of, electricity bills being what they were.

That took care of things up here. He edged his door open, made sure the hallway was deserted, and sidled out in vest, trousers, and carrying the .38. He'd done everything humanly possible to make the thing foolproof, but it occurred to him, as he made his way noiselessly to the emergency staircase, that there was one thing all these precautions would be sterile against, if it was involved in any way, and that

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was mind-reading. The thought itself was enough to send a shudder up his spine, make him want to give up before he'd even gone any further, so he resolutely put it from him. Personally he'd never been much of a believer in that sort of thing, so it wasn't hard for him to discount it. But disbelief in a thing is not always a guarantee that it does not exist or exert influence, and he would have been the first to admit that.

The safety stairs were cement and not carpeted like the hallways, but even so he managed to move down them with a minimum of sound once his senses had done all they could to assure him the whole shaft was empty of life from its top to its bottom.

He eased the hinged fire-door on the ninth open a fraction of an inch, and reconnoitered the hall in both directions; forward through the slit before him, rearward through the seam between the hinges. This was the most important part of the undertaking. Everything depended on this step. It was vital to get into that room unseen. Even if he did not know what he was up against, there was no sense letting what he was up against know who he was.

He stood there for a long time like that, without moving, almost without breathing, narrowly studying each and every one of the inscrutably closed doors up and down the hall. Finally he broke for it.

He had his passkey ready before he left the shelter of the fire-door. He stabbed it into the lock of 913, turned it, and opened the door with no more than two deft, quick, almost soundless movements. He had to work fast, to get in out of the open. He got behind the door once he was through, got the key out, closed the door — and left the room dark. The whole maneuver, he felt reasonably sure, could not have been accomplished more subtly by anything except a ghost or wraith.

He took a long deep breath behind the closed door and relaxed — a little. Leaving the room dark around him didn't make for very much peace of mind — there was always the thought that *It* might already be in here with him — but he was determined not to show his face even to the blank walls.

He was now, therefore, Mr. John Brown, Room 913, for the rest of the night, unsuspectingly waiting to be — whatever it was had happened to Hopper, Hastings, Dillberry. He had a slight edge on them because he had a gun in his pocket, but try to shoot a noxious vapor (for instance) with a .38 bullet!

First he made sure of the telephone, his one lifeline to the outside world. He carefully explored the wire in the dark, inch by inch from the base of the instrument down to the box against the wall, to make sure the wire wasn't cut or rendered useless in any way. Then he opened the closet door and examined the inside of that, by sense of touch alone. Nothing in there but a row of empty hangers. Then he cased the bath, still without the aid of light; tried the water faucets, the drains, even the medicine

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chest. Next he devoted his attention to the bed itself, explored the mattress and the springs, even got down and swept an arm back and forth under it, like an old maid about to retire for the night. The other furniture also got a health examination. He tested the rug with his foot for unevennesses. Finally there remained the window, that mouthway to doom. He didn't go close to it. He stayed well back within the gloom of the room, even though there was nothing, not even a rooftop or water tank, opposite, from which the interior of this room could be seen; the buildings all around were much lower. It couldn't tell him anything; it seemed to be just a window embrasure. If it was more than that, it was one up on him.

Finally he took out his gun, slipped the safety off, laid it down beside the phone on the nightstand. Then he lay back on the bed, shoes and all, crossed his ankles, folded his hands under his head, and lay staring up at the pool of blackness over him that was the ceiling. He couldn't hear a thing, after that, except the whisper of his breathing, and he had to listen close to get even that.

The minutes pulled themselves out into a quarter hour, a half, a whole one, like sticky taffy. All sorts of horrid possibilities occurred to him, lying there in the dark, and made his skin crawl. He remembered the Conan Doyle story, *The Speckled Band*, in which a deadly snake had been lowered through a transom night after night in an effort to get it to bite the sleeper. That wouldn't fit this case. He'd come upon the scene too quickly each time. You couldn't juggle a deadly snake — had to take your time handling it. None of his three predecessors had been heard to scream, nor had their broken bodies shown anything but the impact of the fall itself. None of the discoloration or rigidity of snake venom. He'd looked at the bodies at the morgue.

But it was not as much consolation as it should have been, in the dark. He wished he'd been a little braver — one of these absolutely fearless guys. It didn't occur to him that he was being quite brave enough already for one guy, coming up here like this. He'd stretched himself out in here without any certainty he'd ever get up again alive.

He practiced reaching for the phone and for his gun, until he knew just where they both were by heart. They were close enough. He didn't even have to unlimber his elbow. He lit a cigarette, but shielded the match carefully, with his whole body turned toward the wall, so it wouldn't light up his face too much. John Brown could smoke in bed just as well as House Dick Striker.

He kept his eyes on the window more than anything else, almost as if he expected it to sprout a pair of long octopus arms that would reach out, grab him, and toss him through to destruction.

He asked himself fearfully: "Am I holding it off by lying here awake like this waiting for it? Can it *tell* whether

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I'm awake or asleep? Is it on to me, whatever it is?" He couldn't help wincing at the implication of the supernatural this argued. A guy could go batty thinking things like that. Still, it couldn't be denied that the condition of the bed, each time before this, proved that the victims had been asleep and not awake just before it happened.

He thought, "I can pretend I'm asleep, at least, even if I don't actually go to sleep." Nothing must be overlooked in this battle of wits, no matter how inane, how childish it seemed at first sight.

He crushed his cigarette out, gave a stage yawn, meant to be heard if it couldn't be seen, threshed around a little like a man settling himself down for the night; counted ten, and then started to stage-manage his breathing, pumping it slower and heavier, like a real sleeper's. But under it all he was as alive as a third rail and his heart was ticking away under his ribs like a taximeter.

It was harder to lie waiting for it this way than it had been the other, just normally awake. The strain was almost unbearable. He wanted to leap up, swing out wildly around him in the dark, and yell: "Come on, you! Come on and get it over with!"

Suddenly he tensed more than he was already, if that was possible, and missed a breath. Missed two — forgot all about timing them. Something — what was it? — something was in the air; his nose was warning him, twitching, crinkling, almost like a retriever's. Sweet, foreign, subtle, something that didn't belong. He took a deep sniff, held it, while he tried to test the thing, analyze it, differentiate it, like a chemist without apparatus.

Then he got it. If he hadn't been so worked up in the first place, he would have got it even sooner. Sandalwood. Sandalwood incense. That meant the Chinese couple, the Youngs, the apartment below. They'd been burning it last night when he was in there, a stick of it in front of that joss of theirs. But how could it get up here? And how could it be harmful, if they were right in the same room with it and it didn't do anything to them?

How did he know they were in the same room with it? A fantastic picture flashed before his mind of the two of them down there right now, wearing gauze masks or filters over their faces, like operating surgeons. Aw, that was ridiculous! They'd been in the room a full five minutes with the stuff — he and Perry and Courlander — without masks, and nothing had happened to them.

But he wasn't forgetting how Young's head had swung around a little to scan the reversed register when they came in tonight — nor how their dog had whined, like it had whined when Dillberry's body fell past their window, when — Bob had said — it never whined at other times.

He sat up, pulled off his shoes, and started to move noiselessly around, sniffing like a bloodhound, trying to find out just how and where that odor was getting into the room. It must be

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at some particular point more than another. It wasn't just *soaking* up through the floor. Maybe it was nothing, then again maybe it was something. It didn't seem to be doing anything to him so far. He could breathe all right, he could think all right. But there was always the possibility that it was simply a sort of smoke-screen or carrier, used to conceal or transport some other gas that was to follow. The sugar-coating for the poison!

He sniffed at the radiator, at the bathroom drains, at the closet door, and in each of the four corners of the room. It was faint, almost unnoticeable in all those places. Then he stopped before the open window. It was much stronger here; it was coming in here!

He edged warily forward, leaned out a little above the low guard-rail, but careful not to shift his balance out of normal, for this very posture of curiosity might be the crux of the whole thing, the incense a decoy to get them to lean out the window. Sure, it was coming out of their open window, traveling up the face of the building, and — some of it — drifting in through his. That was fairly natural, on a warm, still night like this, without much circulation to the air.

Nothing happened. The window didn't suddenly fold up and throw him or tilt him forward, the guard rail didn't suddenly collapse before him and pull him after it by sheer optical illusion (for he wasn't touching it in any way). He waited a little longer, tested it a little longer. No other result. It was, then, incense and nothing more.

He went back into the room again, stretched out on the bed once more, conscious for the first time of cold moisture on his brow, which he now wiped off. The aroma became less noticeable presently, as though the stick had burned down. Then finally it was gone. And he was just the way he'd been before.

"So it wasn't that," he dismissed it, and reasoned, "It's because they're Chinese that I was so ready to suspect them. They always seem sinister to the Occidental mind."

There was nothing else after that, just darkness and waiting. Then presently there was a gray line around the window enclosure, and next he could see his hands when he held them out before his face, and then the night bloomed into day and the death watch was over.

He didn't come down to the lobby for another hour, until the sun was up and there was not the slimmest possibility of anything happening any more — this time. He came out of the elevator looking haggard, and yet almost disappointed at the same time.

Maxon eyed him as though he'd never expected to see him again. "Anything?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"Nothing," Striker answered.

Maxon turned without another word, went back to the safe, brought a bottle out to him.

"Yeah, I could use some of that," was all the dick said.

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"So I guess this shows," Maxon suggested hopefully, "that there's nothing to it after all. I mean about the room being —"

Striker took his time about answering. "It shows," he said finally, "that whoever it is, is smarter than we gave 'em credit for. Knew enough not to tip their mitts. Nothing happened because Someone knew I was in there, knew who I was, and knew *why* I was in there. And *that* shows it's somebody in this hotel who's at the bottom of it."

"You mean you're not through yet?"

"Through yet? I haven't even begun!"

"Well, what're you going to do next?"

"I'm going to catch up on a night's sleep, first off," Striker let him know. "And after that, I'm going to do a little clerical work. Then when that's through, I'm going to keep my own counsel. No offense, but" — he tapped himself on the forehead — "only this little fellow in here is going to be in on it, not you nor the manager nor anyone else."

He started his "clerical work" that very evening. Took the old ledgers for March, 1933, and September, 1934, out of the safe, and copied out the full roster of guests from the current one (July, 1935). Then he took the two bulky volumes and the list of present guests up to his room with him and went to work.

First he cancelled out all the names on the current list that didn't appear on either of the former two rosters. That left him with exactly three guests who were residing in the building now and who also had been in it at the time of one of the first two "suicides." The three were Mr. and Mrs. Young, Atkinson (Peter the Hermit), and Miss Flobelle Heilbron (the cantankerous vixen in 911). Then he cancelled those of the above that didn't appear on *both* of the former lists. There was only one name left uncancelled now. There was only one guest who had been in occupancy during *each and every one* of the three times that a "suicide" had taken place in 913. Atkinson and Miss Heilbron had been living in the hotel in March 1933. The Youngs and Miss Heilbron had been living in the building in September, 1934. Atkinson (who must have been away the time before on one of his nomadic "prospecting trips"), the Youngs, and Miss Heilbron were all here now. The one name that recurred triply was Miss Flobelle Heilbron.

So much for his "clerical work." Now came a little research work.

She didn't hug her room quite as continuously and tenaciously as Peter the Hermit, but she never strayed very far from it nor stayed away very long at a time — was constantly popping in and out a dozen times a day to feed a cat she kept.

He had a word with Perry the following morning, and soon after lunch the manager, who received complimentary passes to a number of movie

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theaters in the vicinity, in return for giving them advertising space about his premises, presented her with a matinee pass for that afternoon. She was delighted at this unaccustomed mark of attention, and fell for it like a ton of bricks.

Striker saw her start out at two, and that gave him two full hours. He made a bee-line up there and pass-keyed himself in. The cat was out in the middle of the room nibbling at a plate of liver which she'd thoughtfully left behind for it. He started going over the place. He didn't need two hours. He hit it within ten minutes after he'd come into the room, in one of her bureau-drawers, all swathed up in intimate wearing-apparel, as though she didn't want anyone to know she had it.

It was well-worn, as though it had been used plenty — kept by her at nights and studied for years. It was entitled *Mesmerism, Self-Taught; How to Impose Your Will on Others.*

But something even more of a give-away happened while he was standing there holding it in his hand. The cat raised its head from the saucer of liver, looked up at the book, evidently recognized it, and whisked under the bed, ears flat.

"So she's been practicing on you, has she?" Striker murmured. "And you don't like it. Well, I don't either. I wonder who else she's been trying it on?"

He opened the book and thumbed through it. One chapter heading, appropriately enough, was *Experiments at a Distance.* He narrowed his eyes, read a few words. "In cases where the subject is out of sight, behind a door or on the other side of a wall, it is better to begin with simple commands, easily transferable. 1 — Open the door. 2 — Turn around, etc."

Well, "jump out of the window" was a simple enough command. Beautifully simple — and final. Was it possible that old crackpot was capable of —? She was domineering enough to be good at it, heaven knows. Perry'd wanted her out of the building years ago, but she was still in it today. Striker had never believed in such balderdash, but suppose — through some fluke or other — it had worked out with ghastly effect in just this one case?

He summoned the chambermaid and questioned her. She was a lumpy, work-worn old woman, and had as little use for the guest in question as anyone else, so she wasn't inclined to be reticent. "Boss me?" she answered, "Man, she sure do!"

"I don't mean boss you out loud. Did she ever try to get you to do her bidding without, uh, talking?"

She eyed him shrewdly, nodded. "Sure nuff. All the time. How you fine out about it?" She cackled uproariously. "She dippy, Mr. Striker, suh. I *mean!* She stand still like this, look at me *hard,* like this." She placed one hand flat across her forehead as if she had a headache. "So nothing happen', I just mine my business. Then she say: 'Whuffo you don't do what I just tole you?' I say, 'You ain't tole

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me nothing yet.' She say, 'Ain't you got my message? My sum-conscious done tole you, "Clean up good underneath that chair." '

"I say, 'Yo sum-conscious better talk a little louder, den, cause I ain't heard a thing — and I got good ears!' "

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Did you ever *feel* anything when she tried that stunt? Feel like doing the things she wanted?"

"Yeah man!" she vigorously asserted. "But not what she wanted! I feel like busting dis yere mop-handle on her haid, dass what I feel!"

He went ahead investigating after he'd dismissed her, but nothing else turned up. He was far from satisfied with what he'd got on Miss Heilbron, incriminating as the book was. It didn't *prove* anything. It wasn't strong enough evidence to base an accusation on.

He cased the Youngs's apartment that same evening, while they were at the wife's broadcasting studio. This, over Perry's almost apoplectic protests. And there, as if to confuse the issue still further, he turned up something that was at least as suspicious in its way as the mesmerism handbook. It was a terrifying grotesque mask of a demon, presumably a prop from the Chinese theater down on Doyer Street. It was hanging at the back of the clothes closet, along with an embroidered Chinese ceremonial robe. It was limned in some kind of luminous or phosphorescent paint that made it visible in the gloom in all its bestiality and horror. He nearly jumped out of his shoes himself at first sight of it. And that only went to show what conceivable effect it could have seeming to swim through the darkness in the middle of the night, for instance, toward the bed of a sleeper in the room above. That the victim would jump out of the window in frenzy would be distinctly possible.

Against this could be stacked the absolute lack of motive, the conclusive proof (two out of three times) that no one had been in the room with the victim, and the equally conclusive proof that the Youngs hadn't been in the building at all the first time, mask or no mask. In itself, of course, the object had as much right to be in their apartment as the mesmerism book had in Miss Heilbron's room. The wife was in theatrical business, liable to be interested in stage curios of that kind.

Boiled down, it amounted to this: that the Youngs were still very much in the running.

It was a good deal harder to gain access to Peter the Hermit's room without tipping his hand, since the eccentric lived up to his nickname to the fullest. However, he finally managed to work it two days later, with the help of Peter, the hotel exterminator, and a paperful of red ants. He emptied the contents of the latter outside the doorsill, then Perry and the exterminator forced their way in on the pretext of combating the invasion. It took all of Perry's cajolery and persuasiveness to draw the Hermit out of his habitat for even half an hour,

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but a professed eagerness to hear all about his "gold mines" finally turned the trick, and the old man was led around the turn of the hall. Striker jumped in as soon as the coast was clear and got busy.

It was certainly fuller of unaccountable things than either of the other two had been, but on the other hand there was nothing as glaringly suspicious as the mask or the hypnotism book. Pyramids of hoarded canned-goods stacked in the closet, and quantities of tools and utensils used in mining operations; sieves, pans, shorthandled picks, a hooded miner's lamp with a reflector, three fishing rods and an assortment of hooks ranging from the smallest to big triple-toothed monsters, plenty of tackle, hip boots, a shotgun, a pair of scales (for assaying the gold that he had never found), little sacks of worthless ore, a mallet for breaking up the ore specimens, and the pair of heavy knapsacks that he took with him each time he set out on his heartbreaking expeditions. It all seemed legitimate enough. Striker wasn't enough of a mining expert to know for sure. But he was enough of a detective to know there wasn't anything there that could in itself cause the death of anyone two rooms over and at right angles to this.

He had, of necessity, to be rather hasty about it, for the old man could be heard regaling Perry with the story of his mines just out of sight around the turn of the hall the whole time Striker was in there. He cleared out just as the exterminator finally got through killing the last of the "planted" ants.

To sum up: Flobelle Heilbron still had the edge on the other two as chief suspect, both because of the mesmerism handbook and because of her occupancy record. The Chinese couple came next, because of the possibilities inherent in that mask, as well as the penetrative powers of their incense and the whining of their dog. Peter the Hermit ran the others a poor third. Had it not been for his personal eccentricity and the location of his room, Striker would have eliminated him altogether.

On the other hand, he had turned up no real proof yet, and the motive remained as unfathomable as ever. In short, he was really no further than before he'd started. He had tried to solve it circumstantially, by deduction, and that hadn't worked. He had tried to solve it first hand, by personal observation, and that hadn't worked. Only one possible way remained, to try to solve it at *second hand*, through the eyes of the next potential victim, who would at the same time be a material witness — if he survived. To do this it was necessary to anticipate it, *time* it, try to see if it had some sort of spacing or rhythm to it or was just hit-or-miss, in order to know more or less when to expect it to recur. The only way to do this was to take the three dates he had and average them.

Striker took the early part of that evening off. He didn't ask permission

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for it, just walked out without saying anything to anyone about it. He was determined not to take anyone into his confidence this time.

He hadn't been off the premises a night since he'd first been hired by the hotel, and this wasn't a night off. This was strictly business. He had seventy-five dollars with him that he'd taken out of his hard-earned savings at the bank that afternoon. He didn't go where the lights were bright. He went down to the Bowery.

He strolled around a while looking into various barrooms and "smoke houses" from the outside. Finally he saw something in one that seemed to suit his purpose, went in and ordered two beers.

"Two?" said the barman in surprise. "You mean one after the other?"

"I mean two right together at one time," Striker told him.

He carried them over to the table at the rear, at which he noticed a man slumped with his head in his arms. He wasn't asleep or in a drunken stupor. Striker had already seen him push a despairing hand through his hair once.

He sat down opposite the motionless figure, clinked the glasses together to attract the man's attention. The derelict slowly raised his head.

"This is for you," Striker said, pushing one toward him.

The man just nodded dazedly, as though incapable of thanks any more. Gratitude had rusted on him from lack of use.

"What're your prospects?" Striker asked him bluntly.

"None. Nowhere to go. Not a cent to my name. I've only got one friend left, and I was figgerin' on looking him up 'long about midnight. If I don't tonight, maybe I will tomorrow night. I surely will one of these nights, soon. His name is the East River."

"I've got a proposition for you. Want to hear it?"

"You're the boss."

"How would you like to have a good suit, a clean shirt on your back for a change? How would you like to sleep in a comfortable bed tonight? In a three-dollar room, all to yourself, in a good hotel uptown?"

"Mister," said the man in a choked voice, "if I could do that once again, just once again, I wouldn't care if it was my last night on earth! What's the catch?"

"What you just said. It's liable to be." He talked for a while, told the man what there was to know, the little that he himself knew. "It's not certain, you understand. Maybe nothing'll happen at all. The odds are about fifty-fifty. If nothing does happen, you keep the clothes, the dough, and I'll even dig up a porter's job for you. You'll be that much ahead. Now I've given it to you straight from the shoulder. I'm not concealing anything from you, you know what to expect."

The man wet his lips reflectively. "Fifty-fifty — that's not so bad. Those are good enough odds. I used to be a gambler when I was young. And it can't hurt more than the river filling up your lungs. I'm weary of dragging out my days. What've I got to

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lose? Mister, you're on." He held out an unclean hand hesitantly. "I don't suppose you'd want to —"

Striker shook it as he stood up. "I never refuse to shake hands with a brave man. Come on, we've got a lot to do. We've got to find a barber-shop, a men's clothing store if there are any still open, a luggage shop, and a restaurant."

An hour and a half later a taxi stopped on the corner diagonally opposite the St. Anselm, with Striker and a spruce, well-dressed individual seated in it side by side. On the floor at their feet were two shiny, brand-new valises, containing their linings and nothing else.

"Now there it is over there, on the other side," Striker said. "I'm going to get out here, and you go over in the cab and get out by yourself at the entrance. Count out what's left of the money I gave you."

His companion did so laboriously. "Forty-nine dollars and fifty cents."

"Don't spend another penny of it, get me? I've already paid the cab-fare and tip. See that you carry your own bags in, so they don't notice how light they are. Remember, what's left is all yours if —"

"Yeah, I know," said the other man unabashedly. "If I'm alive in the morning."

"Got your instructions straight?"

"I want an outside room. I want a ninth floor outside room. No other floor will do. I want a ninth floor outside room with a bath."

"That'll get you the right one by elimination. I happen to know it's vacant. You won't have to pay in advance. The two bags and the outfit'll take care of that. Tell him to sign Harry Kramer for you — that what you said your name was? Now this is your last chance to back out. You can still welsh on me if you want — I won't do anything to you."

"No," the man said doggedly. "This way I've got a chance at a job tomorrow. The other way I'll be back on the beach. I'm glad somebody finally found some use for me."

Striker averted his head, grasped the other's scrawny shoulder encouragingly. "Good luck, brother — and God forgive me for doing this, if I don't see you again." He swung out of the cab, opened a newspaper in front of his face, and narrowly watched over the top of it until the thin but well-dressed figure had alighted and carried the two bags up the steps and into a doorway from which he might never emerge alive.

He sauntered up to the desk a few minutes later himself, from the other direction, the coffee shop entrance. Maxon was still blotting the ink on the signature.

Striker read, *Harry Kramer, New York City — 913.*

He went up to his room at his usual time, but only to get out his gun. Then he came down to the lobby again. Maxon was the only one in sight. Striker stepped in behind the desk, made his way back to the tele-

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phone switchboard, which was screened from sight by the tiers of mailboxes. He sat down before the switchboard and shot his cuffs, like a wireless operator on a ship at sea waiting for an SOS. The St. Anselm didn't employ a night operator. The desk clerk attended to the calls himself after twelve.

"What's the idea?" Maxon wanted to know.

Striker wasn't confiding in anyone this time. "Can't sleep," he said noncommittally. "Why should you object if I give you a hand down here?"

Kramer was to knock the receiver off the hook at the first sign of danger, or even anything that he didn't understand or like the looks of. There was no other way to work it than this, roundabout as it was. Striker was convinced that if he lurked about the ninth floor corridor within sight or earshot of the room, he would simply be banishing the danger, postponing it. He didn't want that. He wanted to know what it was. If he waited in his own room he would be even more cut off. The danger signal would have to be relayed up to him from down here. The last three times had shown him how ineffective that was.

A desultory call or two came through the first hour he was at the board, mostly requests for morning calls. He meticulously jotted them down for the day operator. Nothing from 913.

About two o'clock Maxon finally started to catch on. "You going to work it all night?"

"Yeh," said Striker shortly. "Don't talk to me. Don't let on I'm behind here at all."

At two thirty-five there were footsteps in the lobby, a peculiar sobbing sound like an automobile tire deflating, and a whiff of sandalwood traveled back to Striker after the car had gone up. He called Maxon guardedly back to him.

"The Youngs?"

"Yeah, they just came in."

"Was that their dog whining?"

"Yeah. I guess it hadda see another dog about a man."

Maybe a dead man, thought Striker morosely. He raised the plug toward the socket of 913. He ought to call Kramer, make sure he stayed awake. That would be as big a giveaway as pussyfooting around the hall up there, though. He let the plug drop back again.

About three o'clock more footsteps sounded. Heavy ones stamping in from the street. A man's voice sounded hoarsely. "Hey, desk! One of your people just tumbled out, around on the side of the building!"

The switchboard stool went over with a crack, something blurred streaked across the lobby, and the elevator darted crazily upward. Striker nearly snapped the control lever out of its socket, the way he bore down on it. The car had never traveled so fast before, but he swore horribly all the way up. Too late again!

The door was closed. He needled his passkey at the lock, shouldered the door in. The light was on, the room was empty. The window was wide

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open, the guy was gone. The fifty-fifty odds had paid off — the wrong way.

Striker's face was twisted balefully. He got out his gun. But there was only empty space around him.

He was standing there like that, bitter, defeated, granite-eyed, the gun uselessly in his hand, when Perry and Courlander came. It would be Courlander again, too!

"Is he dead?" Striker asked grimly.

"That street ain't quilted," was the dick's dry answer. He eyed the gun scornfully. "What're you doing? Holding the fort against the Indians, sonny boy?"

"I suggest instead of standing there throwing bouquets," Striker said, "you phone your precinct house and have a dragnet thrown around this building." He reached for the phone. Courlander's arm quickly shot out and barred him. "Not so fast. What would I be doing that for?"

"Because this is murder!"

"Where've I heard that before?" He went over for the inevitable note. "What's this?" He read it aloud. "'Can't take it any more.'"

"So you're still going to trip over those things!"

"And you're still going to try to hurdle it?"

"It's a fake like all the others were. I knew that all along. I couldn't prove it until now. This time I can! Finally."

"Yeah? How!"

"Because the guy couldn't write! Couldn't even write his own name! He even had to have the clerk sign the register for him downstairs. And if that isn't proof enough there's been somebody else in this room, have a look at that." He pointed to the money Kramer had left neatly piled on the dresser top. "Count that! Four-fifty. Four singles and a four-bit piece. He had forty-nine dollars and fifty cents on him when he came into this room, and he didn't leave the room. He's down there in his underwear now. Here's all his outer clothing up here. What became of that forty-five bucks?"

Courlander looked at him. "How do you know so much about it? How do you know he couldn't write, and just what dough he had?"

"Because I planted him up here myself!" Striker ground out exasperatedly. "It was a set-up! I picked him up, outfitted him, staked him, and brought him in here. He ran away to sea at twelve, never even learned his alphabet. I tested him and found out he was telling the truth. He couldn't write a word, not even his own name! Now do you understand? Are you gonna stand here all night or are you going to do something about it?"

Courlander snatched up the phone, called his precinct house. "Courlander. Send over a detail, quick! St. Anselm. That suicide reported from here has the earmarks of a murder."

"Earmarks!" scoffed Striker. "It's murder from head to foot, with a capital *M!*" He took the phone in turn. "Pardon me if I try to lock the stable door after the nag's been stolen. . . . H'lo, Maxon? Anyone

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left the building since this broke, anyone at all? Sure of that? Well, see that no one does. Call in that cop that's looking after the body. Lock up the secondary exit through the coffee shop. No one's to leave, no one at all, understand?" He threw the phone back at Courlander. "Confirm that for me, will you? Cops don't take orders from me. We've got them! They're still in the building some place! There's no way to get down from the roof. It's seven stories higher than any of the others around it."

But Courlander wasn't taking to cooperation very easily. "All this is based on your say-so that the guy couldn't write and had a certain amount of money on him when he came up here. So far so good. But something a little more definite than that better turn up. Did you mark the bills you gave him?"

"No, I didn't," Striker had to admit. "I wasn't figuring on robbery being the motive. I still don't think it's the primary one, I think it's only incidental. I don't think there is any consistent motive. I think we're up against a maniac."

"If they weren't marked, how do you expect us to trace them? Everyone in this place must have a good deal more than just forty-five dollars to their name! If you did plant somebody, why didn't you back him up, why didn't you look after him right? How did you expect to be able to help him if you stayed all the way downstairs, nine floors below?"

"I couldn't very well hang around outside the room. That would've been tipping my hand. I warned him, put him on his guard. He was to knock the phone over. That's all he had to do. Whatever it was, was too quick even for that."

Two members of the Homicide Squad appeared. "What's all the fuss and feathers? Where're the earmarks you spoke of, Courlander? The body's slated for an autopsy, but the examiner already says it don't look like anything but just the fall killed him."

"The house dick here," Courlander said, "insists the guy couldn't write and is short forty-five bucks. He planted him up here because he has an idea those other three cases — the ones I covered, you know — were murder."

They started to question Striker rigorously as though he himself were the culprit. "What gave you the idea it would happen tonight?"

"I didn't know it would happen tonight. I took a stab at it, that's all. I figured it was about due somewhere around now."

"Was the door open or locked when you got up here?"

"Locked."

"Where was the key?"

"Where it is now — over there on the dresser."

"Was the room disturbed in any way?"

"No, it was just like it is now."

They took a deep breath in unison, a breath that meant they were being very patient with an outsider. "Then what makes you think somebody be-

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side himself was in here at the time?"

"Because that note is in here, and he couldn't write! Because there's forty-five dollars —"

"One thing at a time. Can you prove he couldn't write?"

"He proved it to *me!*"

"Yes, but can you prove it to *us?*"

Striker caught a tuft of his own hair in his fist, dragged at it, let it go again. "No, because he's gone now."

The other one leaned forward, dangerously casual. "You say you warned him what to expect, and yet he was willing to go ahead and chance it, just for the sake of a meal, a suit of clothes, a bed. How do you explain that?"

"He was at the end of his rope. He was about ready to quit anyway."

Striker saw what was coming.

"Oh, he was? How do you know?"

"Because he told me so. He said he was — thinking of the river."

"*Before* you explained your proposition or after?"

"Before," Striker had to admit.

They blew out their breaths scornfully, eyed one another as though this man's stupidity was unbelievable. "He brings a guy up from the beach," one said to the other, "that's already told him *beforehand* he's got doing the Dutch on his mind, and then when the guy goes ahead and does it, he tries to make out he's been murdered."

Striker knocked his chair over, stood up in exasperation. "But can't you get it through your concrete domes? What was driving him to it? The simplest reason in the world! *Lack of shelter, lack of food, lack of comfort.* Suddenly he's given all that at one time. Is it reasonable to suppose he'll cut his own enjoyment of it short, put an end to it halfway through the night? Tomorrow night, yes, after he's out of here, back where he was again, after the let-down has set in. But not tonight."

"Very pretty, but it don't mean a thing. The swell surroundings only brought it on quicker. He wanted to die in comfort, in style, while he was about it. That's been known to happen too, don't forget. About his not being able to write, sorry, but" — they flirted the sheet of notepaper before his eyes — "this evidence shows he *was* able to write. He must have put one over on you. You probably tipped your mitt in giving him your writing test. He caught on you were looking for someone who couldn't write, so he played 'possum. About the money — well, it musta gone out the window with him even if he *was* just in his underwear, and somebody down there snitched it before the cop came along. No evidence. The investigation's closed as far as we're concerned." They sauntered out into the hall.

"Damn it," Striker yelled after them, "you can't walk out of here! You're turning your backs on a murder!"

"We *are* walking out," came back from the hallway. "Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" The elevator door clicked mockingly shut.

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Courlander said almost pityingly, "It looks like tonight wasn't your lucky night."

"It isn't yours either!" Striker bellowed. He swung his fist in a barrelhouse right, connected with the city dick's lower jaw, and sent him volplaning back on his shoulders against the carpet.

Perry's moon-face and bald head were white as an ostrich egg with long-nursed resentment. "Get out of here! You're fired! Bring bums into my house so they can commit suicide on the premises, will you? You're through!"

"Fired?" Striker gave him a smouldering look that made Perry draw hastily back out of range. "I'm quitting, is what you mean! I wouldn't even finish the night out in a murder nest like this!" He stalked past the manager, clenched hands in pockets, and went up to his room to pack his belongings.

His chief problem was to avoid recognition by any of the staff, when he returned there nearly a year later. To achieve this after all the years he'd worked in the hotel, he checked in swiftly and inconspicuously. The mustache he had been growing for the past eight months and which now had attained full maturity, effectively changed the lower part of his face. The horn-rimmed glasses, with plain inserts instead of ground lenses, did as much for the upper part, provided his hat brim was tipped down far enough. If he stood around, of course, and let them stare, eventual recognition was a certainty, but he didn't. He'd put on a little added weight from the long months of idleness in the furnished room. He hadn't worked in the interval. He could no doubt have got another berth, but he considered that he was still on a job — even though he was no longer drawing pay for it — and he meant to see it through.

A lesser problem was to get the room itself. If he couldn't get it at once, he fully intended taking another for a day or two until he could, but this of course would add greatly to the risk of recognition. As far as he could tell, however, it was available right now. He'd walked through the side street bordering the hotel three nights in a row, after dark, and each time that particular window had been unlighted. The red tag would quickly tell him whether he was right or not.

Other than that, his choice of this one particular night for putting the long-premeditated move into effect was wholly arbitrary. The interval since the last time it had happened roughly approximated the previous intervals, and that was all he had to go by. One night, along about now, was as good as another.

He paid his bill at the rooming house and set out on foot, carrying just one bag with him. His radio and the rest of his belongings he left behind in the landlady's charge, to be called for later. It was about nine o'clock now. He wanted to get in before Maxon's shift. He'd been more

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intimate with Maxon than the other clerks, had practically no chance of getting past Maxon unidentified.

He stopped in at a hardware store on his way and bought two articles: a long section of stout hempen rope and a small sharp "fruit" or "kitchen" knife with a wooden handle. He inserted both objects in the bag with his clothing, right there in the shop, then set out once more. He bent his hat brim a little lower over his eyes as he neared the familiar hotel entrance, that was all. He went up the steps and inside unhesitatingly. One of the boys whom he knew by sight ducked for his bag without giving any sign of recognition. That was a good omen. He moved swiftly to the desk without looking around or giving anyone a chance to study him at leisure. There was a totally new man on now in Dennison's place, someone who didn't know him at all. That was the second good omen. And red was peering from the pigeon-hole of 913.

His eye quickly traced a vertical axis through it. Not another one in a straight up-and-down line with it. It was easy to work it if you were familiar with the building layout, and who should be more familiar than he?

He said, "I want a single on the side street, where the traffic isn't so heavy." He got it the first shot out of the box!

He paid for it, signed *A. C. Sherman, New York*, and quickly stepped into the waiting car, with his head slightly lowered but not enough so to be conspicuously furtive.

A minute later the gauntlet had been successfully run. He gave the boy a dime, closed the door, and had gained his objective undetected. Nothing had been changed in it. It was the same as when he'd slept in it that first time, nearly two years ago now. It was hard to realize, looking around at it, that it had seen four men go to their deaths. He couldn't help wondering, "Will I be the fifth?" That didn't frighten him any. It just made him toughen up inside and promise, "Not without a lotta trouble, buddy, not without a lotta trouble!"

He unpacked his few belongings and put them away as casually as though he were what he seemed to be, an unsuspecting newcomer who had just checked into a hotel. The coiled rope he hid under the mattress of the bed for the time being; the fruit knife and his gun under the pillows.

He killed the next two hours, until the deadline was due; undressed, took a bath, then hung around in his pajamas reading a paper he'd brought up with him.

At twelve he made his final preparations. He put the room light out first of all. Then in the dark he removed the whole bedding, mattress and all, transferred it to the floor, laying bare the framework and bolted-down coils of the bed. He looped the rope around the bed's midsection from side to side, weaving it inextricably in and out of the coils. Then he knotted a free length to a degree that

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defied undoing, splicing the end for a counter-knot.

He coiled it three times around his own middle, again knotting it to a point of Houdini-like bafflement. In between there was a slack of a good eight or ten feet. More than enough, considering the ease with which the bed could be pulled about on its little rubber-tired casters, to give him a radius of action equal to the inside limits of the room. Should pursuit through the doorway become necessary, that was what the knife was for. He laid it on the nightstand, alongside his gun.

Then he replaced the bedding, concealing the rope fastened beneath it. He carefully kicked the loose length, escaping at one side, out of sight under the bed. He climbed in, covered up.

The spiny roughness and constriction of his improvised safety-belt bothered him a good deal at first, but he soon found that by lying still and not changing position too often, he could accustom himself to it, even forget about it.

An hour passed, growing more and more blurred as it neared its end. He didn't try to stay awake, in fact encouraged sleep, feeling that the rope would automatically give him more than a fighting chance, and that to remain awake and watchful might in some imponderable way ward off the very thing he was trying to come to grips with.

At the very last he was dimly conscious, through already somnolent faculties, of a vague sweetness in the air, lulling him even further. Sandalwood incense. "So they're still here," he thought indistinctly. But the thought wasn't sufficient to rouse him to alertness; he wouldn't let it. His eyelids started to close of their own weight. He let them stay down.

Only once, after that, did his senses come to the surface. The scratchy roughness of the rope as he turned in his sleep. "Rope," he thought dimly, and placing what it was, dropped off into oblivion again.

The second awakening came hard. He fought against it stubbornly, but it slowly won out, dragging him against his will. It was two-fold. Not dangerous or threatening, but mentally painful, like anything that pulls you out of deep sleep. Excruciatingly painful. He wanted to be let alone. Every nerve cried out for continued sleep, and these two spearheads — noise and glare — continued prodding at him, tormenting him.

Then suddenly they'd won out. *Thump!* — one last cruelly-jolting impact of sound, and he'd opened his eyes. The glare now attacked him in turn; it was like needles boring into the pupils of his defenseless, blurred eyes. He tried to shield them from it with one protective hand, and it still found them out. He struggled dazedly upright in the bed. The noise had subsided, was gone, after that last successful bang. But the light — it beat into his brain.

It came pulsing from beyond the

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foot of the bed, so that meant it was coming through the open bathroom door. The bed was along the side wall, and the bathroom door should be just beyond its foot. He must have forgotten to put the light out in there. What a brilliance! He could see the light through the partly open door, swinging there on its loose, exposed electric-cord. That is to say, he could see the pulsing gleam and dazzle of it, but he couldn't get it into focus; it was like a sunburst. It was torture, it was burning his sleepy eyeballs out. Have to get up and snap it out. How'd that ever happen anyway? Maybe the switch was defective, current was escaping through it even after it had been turned off, and he was sure he had turned it off.

He struggled out of bed and groped toward it. The room around him was just a blur, his senses swimming with the combination of pitch-blackness and almost solar brilliance they were being subjected to. But it was the bathroom door that was beyond the foot of the bed, that was one thing he was sure of, even in his sleep-fogged condition.

He reached the threshold, groped upward for the switch that was located above the bulb itself. To look upward at it was like staring a blast-furnace in the face without dark glasses. It had seemed to be dangling there just past the half-open door, so accessible. And now it seemed to elude him, swing back a little out of reach. Or maybe it was just that his fumbling fingers had knocked the loose cord into that strange, evasive motion.

He went after it, like a moth after a flame. Took a step across the threshold, still straining upward after it, eyes as useless as though he were standing directly in a lighthouse beam.

Suddenly the door sill seemed to rear. Instead of being just a flat strip of wood, partitioning the floor of one room from the other, it struck him sharply, stunningly, way up the legs, just under the kneecaps. He tripped, overbalanced, plunged forward. The rest was hallucination, catastrophe, destruction.

The light vanished as though it had wings. The fall didn't break; no tiled flooring came up to stop it. The room had suddenly melted into disembodied night. No walls, no floor, nothing at all. Cool air of out-of-doors was rushing upward into the vacuum where the bathroom apparently had been. His whole body was turning completely over, and then over again, and he was going down, down, down. He only had time for one despairing thought as he fell at a sickening speed: "I'm *outside* the building!"

Then there was a wrench that seemed to tear his insides out and snap his head off his neck. The hurtling fall jarred short, and there was a sickening, swaying motion on an even keel. He was turning slowly like something on a spit, clawing helplessly at the nothingness around him. In the cylindrical blackness that kept

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wheeling about him he could make out the gray of the building wall, recurring now on this side, now on that, as he swiveled. He tried to get a grip on the wall with his fingertips, to steady himself, gain a fulcrum! Its sandpapery roughness held no indentation to which he could attach himself even by one wildly searching thumb.

He was hanging there between floors at the end of the rope which had saved his life. There was no other way but to try to climb back along its length, until he could regain that treacherous guard-rail up there over his head. It could be done, it had to be. Fortunately the rope's grip around his waist was automatic. He was being held without having to exert himself, could use all his strength to lift himself hand over hand. That shouldn't be impossible. It was his only chance, at any rate.

The tall oblong of window overhead through which he had just been catapulted bloomed yellow. The room lights had been put on. Someone was in there. Someone had arrived to help him. He arched his back, straining to look up into that terrifying vista of night sky overhead — but that now held the warm friendly yellow patch that meant his salvation.

"Grab that rope up there!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Pull me in! I'm hanging out here! Hurry! There isn't much time!"

Hands showed over the guard-rail. He could see them plainly, tinted yellow by the light behind them. Busy hands, helping hands, answering his plea, pulling him back to the safety of solid ground.

No, wait! Something flashed in them, flashed again. Sawing back and forth, slicing, biting into the rope that held him, just past the guard-rail. He could feel the vibration around his middle, carried down to him like the hum along a wire. Death-dealing hands, completing what had been started, sending him to his doom. With his own knife, that he'd left up there beside the bed!

The rope began to fritter. A little severed outer strand came twining loosely down the main column of it toward him like a snake. Those hands, back and forth, like a demon fiddler drawing his bow across a single tautened violin-string in hurried, frenzied funeral-march that spelled Striker's doom!

"Help!" he shouted in a choked voice, and the empty night sky around seemed to give it mockingly back to him.

A face appeared above the hands and knife, a grinning derisive face peering down into the gloom. Vast mane of snow-white hair and long white beard. It was Peter the Hermit.

So now he knew at last — too late. Too late.

The face vanished again, but the hands, the knife, were busier than ever. There was a microscopic dip, a *give*, as another strand parted, forerunner of the hurtling, whistling drop to come, the hurtling drop that meant

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the painful, bone-crushing end of him.

He burst into a flurry of helpless, agonized motion, flailing out with arms and legs — at what, toward what? Like a tortured fly caught on a pin, from which he could never hope to escape.

Glass shattered somewhere around him; one foot seemed to puncture the solid stone wall, go all the way through it. A red-hot wire stroked across his instep and he jerked convulsively.

There was a second preliminary dip, and a wolf-howl of joy from above. He was conscious of more yellow light, this time from below, not above. A horrified voice that was trying not to lose its self-control sounded just beneath him somewhere. "Grab this! Don't lose your head now! Grab hold of this and don't let go whatever happens!"

Wood, the wood of a chair back, nudged into him, held out into the open by its legs. He caught at it spasmodically with both hands, riveted them to it in a grip like rigor mortis. At the same time somebody seemed to be trying to pull his shoe off his foot, that one foot that had gone in through the wall and seemed to be cut off from the rest of him.

There was a nauseating plunging sensation that stopped as soon as it began. His back went over until he felt like he was breaking in two, then the chair back held, steadied, reversed, started slowly to draw him with it. The severed rope came hissing down on top of him. From above there was a shrill cackle, from closer at hand a woman's scream of pity and terror. Yellow closed around him, swallowed him completely, took him in to itself.

He was stretched out on the floor, a good solid floor — and it was over. He was still holding the chair in that vise-like grip. Young, the Chinese lawyer, was still hanging onto it by the legs, face a pasty gray. Bob, the night porter, was still holding onto his one ankle, and blood was coming through the sock. Mrs. Young, in a sort of chain arrangement, was hugging the porter around the waist. There was broken glass around him on the floor, and a big pool of water with tropical fish floundering in it from the overturned tank. A dog was whining heartbreakingly somewhere in the room. Other than that, there was complete silence.

None of them could talk for a minute or two. Mrs. Young sat squarely down on the floor, hid her face in her hands, and had brief but high-powered hysterics. Striker rolled over and planted his lips devoutly to the dusty carpet, before he even took a stab at getting to his shaky and undependable feet.

"What the hell happened to *you*?" heaved the lawyer finally, mopping his forehead. "Flying around out there like a bat! You scared the daylights out of me."

"Come on up to the floor above and get all the details," Striker invited. He guided himself shakily out of the room, stiff-arming himself

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against the door frame as he went. His legs still felt like rubber, threatening to betray him.

The door of 913 stood open. In the hallway outside it he motioned them cautiously back. "I left my gun in there, and he's got a knife with him too, so take it easy." But he strode into the lighted opening as though a couple of little items like that weren't stopping him after what he'd just been through and nearly didn't survive.

Then he stopped dead. There wasn't anyone at all in the room — any more.

The bed, with the severed section of rope still wound securely around it, was upturned against the window opening, effectively blocking it. The entire bedding, mattress and all, had slid off it, down into the street below. It was easy to see what had happened. The weight of his body, dangling out there, had drawn it first out into line with the opening (and it moved so easily on those rubber-tired casters!), then tipped it over on its side. The mattress and all the encumbering clothes had spilled off it and gone out of their own weight, entangling, blinding, and carrying with them, like a linen avalanche, whatever and whoever stood in their way. It was a fitting finish for an ingenious, heartless murderer.

The criminal caught neatly in his own trap.

"He was too anxious to cut that rope and watch me fall at the same time," Striker said grimly. "He leaned too far out. A feather pillow was enough to push him over the sill!"

He sauntered over to the dresser, picked up a sheet of paper, smiled a little — not gaily. "My 'suicide note'!" He looked at Young. "Funny sensation, reading your own farewell note. I bet not many experience it! Let's see what I'm supposed to have said to myself. 'I'm at the end of my rope.' Queer, how he hit the nail on the head that time! He made them short, always. So there wouldn't be enough to them to give the handwriting away. He never signed them, either. Because he didn't know their names. He didn't even know what they looked like."

Courlander's voice sounded outside, talking it over with someone as he came toward the room. ". . . mattress and all! But instead of him landing on it, which might have saved his life, *it* landed on *him*. Didn't do him a bit of good! He's gone forever."

Striker, leaning against the dresser, wasn't recognized at first.

"Say, wait a minute, where have I seen *you* before?" the city dick growled finally, after he'd given a preliminary look around the disordered room.

"What a detective you turned out to be!" grunted the shaken Striker rudely.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Do you haunt the place? What do you know about this?"

"A damn sight more than you!"

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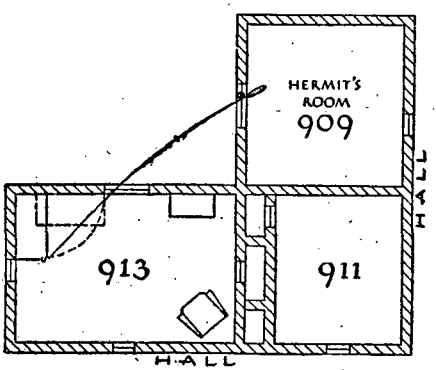
was the uncomplimentary retort. "Sit down and learn some of it — or are you still afraid to face the real facts?"

Courlander sank back into a chair mechanically, mouth agape, staring at Striker.



"I'm not going to *tell* you about it," Striker went on. "I'm going to demonstrate. That's always the quickest way with kindergarten-age intelligences!" He caught at the overturned bed, righted it, rolled it almost effortlessly back into its original position against the side wall, *foot facing directly toward the bathroom door.*

"Notice that slight vibration, that humming the rubber-tired casters make across the floorboards? That's the 'distant thunder' the Youngs heard that night. I'll show you the lightning in just a minute. I'm going over there to his room now. Before I go, just let me point out one thing: the sleeper goes to bed in an unfamiliar room, and his last recollection is of the bathroom door being down there at the foot, the windows over here on this side. He wakes up dazedly in the middle of the night, starts to get out of bed, and comes up against the wall first of all. So then he gets out at the opposite side; but this has only succeeded in disorienting him, balling him up still further. All he's still sure of, now, is that the bathroom door is somewhere down there *at the foot of the bed!* Now just watch closely and you'll see the rest of it in pantomime. I'm going to show you just how it was done."

He went out and they sat tensely, without a word, all eyes on the open window.

Suddenly they all jolted nervously, in unison. A jumbo, triple-toothed fishhook had come into the room, through the window, on the end of three interlocked rods — a single line running through them from hook to reel. It came in diagonally, from the projecting wing. It inclined of its own extreme length, in a gentle arc that swept the triple-threat hook down to floor level. Almost immediately, as the unseen "fisherman" started to withdraw it, it snagged the lower right-hand foot of the bed. It would have been hard for it not to, with its three barbs pointing out in as many directions at once. The bed started to move slowly around after it, on those cushioned casters. There was not enough vibration or rapidity to the maneuver to disturb a heavy sleeper. The open window was now at the foot of the bed, where the

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bathroom had been before the change.

The tension of the line was relaxed. The rod jockeyed a little until the hook had been dislodged from the bed's "ankle." The liberated rod was swiftly but carefully withdrawn, as unobtrusively as it had appeared a moment before.

There was a short wait, horrible to endure. Then a new object appeared before the window opening — flashing refracting light, so that it was hard to identify for a minute even though the room lights were on in this case and the subjects were fully awake. It was a lighted miner's lamp with an unusually high-powered reflector behind it. In addition to this, a black object of some kind, an old sweater or miner's shirt, was hooded around it so that it was almost invisible from the street or the windows on the floor below — all its rays beat inward to the room. It was suspended from the same trio of interlocked rods.

It swayed there motionless for a minute, a devil's beacon, an invitation to destruction. Then it nudged inward, knocked repeatedly against the edge of the window frame, as though to deliberately awaken whoever was within. Then the light coyly retreated a little farther out into the open, but very imperceptibly, as if trying to snare something into pursuit. Then the light suddenly whisked up and was gone, drawn up through space.

With unbelievable swiftness, far quicker than anybody could have come up from the street, the closed door flew back at the touch of Striker's passkey, he darted in, tossed the "suicide note" he was holding onto the dresser, then swiveled the bed back into its original position in the room, scooped up imaginary money.

He stepped out of character and spread his hands conclusively. "See? Horribly simple and — simply horrible."

The tension broke. Mrs. Young buried her face against her husband's chest.

"He was an expert fisherman. Must have done a lot of it up around those mines of his," Striker added. "Probably never failed to hook that bed first cast off the reel. This passkey, that let him in here at will, must have been mislaid years ago and he got hold of it in some way. He brooded and brooded over the way he'd been swindled; this was his way of getting even with the world, squaring things. Or maybe he actually thought these various people in here were spies who came to learn the location of his mines. I don't know, I'm no psychiatrist. The money was just secondary, the icing to his cake. It helped him pay for his room here, staked him to the supplies he took along on his 'prospecting' trips.

"A few things threw me off for a long time. He was away at the time young Hastings fell out. The only possible explanation is that that, alone of the four, was a genuine suicide. By a freak coincidence it occurred in the

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very room the Hermit had been using for his murders. And this in spite of the fact that Hastings had less reason than any of the others; he had just become engaged. I know it's hard to swallow, but we'll have to. I owe you an apology on that one suicide, Courlander."

"And I owe you an apology on the other three, and to show you I'm no bad loser, I'm willing to make it in front of the whole Homicide Squad of New York."

Young asked curiously, "Have you any idea of just where those mines of his that caused all the trouble are located? Ontario, isn't it? Because down at the station tonight a Press Radio news flash came through that oil had been discovered in some abandoned gold-mine pits up there, a gusher worth all kinds of money, and they're running around like mad trying to find out in whom the title to them is vested. I bet it's the same ones!"

Striker nodded sadly. "I wouldn't be surprised. That would be just like one of life's bum little jokes on us."

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